AN

# INTRODUCTION

TO THE

# POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

BY

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# PREFACE.

The following Introduction to the Poetry of Robert Browning was originally delivered in the form of lectures to a class of advanced students. The writer is strongly averse to that study of literature which consists in reading about books rather than in reading the books themselves. Accordingly the present work consists largely of extracts, accompanied by careful analyses and a copious critical commentary. By the help of these, it is hoped that the reader will be enabled to feel the excellence, and will be led to make a wider study of the works of a poet who is, at first, confessedly difficult and somewhat repellent. For this wider study, the chapters on "Development" are intended to serve as a guide. The attention of those already familiar with Browning is specially directed to the *Analysis of Sordello*, much fuller and more exact, it is believed, than any hitherto published. The text of the extracts has been harmonized, as far as possible, with the new and complete edition of Browning's works, now in course of publication in England. References by pages are invariably to this edition.

Besides being indebted to various articles cited in the body of this work, especially to the profound and suggestive criticisms of M. Milsand (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, 6$^{me}$ *Série, tome xi.; Revue Contemporaire*, 107$^{e}$ *Livraison*), the author is conscious of being under obligation to Professor

Dowden's *Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Browning* (*Studies in Literature*), and Mr. Hutton's *Mr. Browning* (*Essays, Theological and Literary*). Much assistance has been afforded by the valuable collection of facts contained in Dr. Furnivall's *Bibliography of Robert Browning*, which also furnishes the text of the Essay on Shelley, quoted in Chapter IV.

That it may not be supposed that obligations to various introductions to Browning now existing in book form, have been overlooked, it may be well to state that the present work was (with the exception of one or two statements of fact) already completed in manuscript, as it now stands, in September, 1886, before, as far as the author is aware, any of these books, except that of Mrs. Sutherland Orr, had appeared.

There is a debt, however, and that the greatest, which yet remains to be acknowledged. Although the author, in writing the following pages, had not the help of Professor Corson's *Introduction to Browning*, he had, some six years ago, the good fortune to hear *My Last Duchess* read and expounded (much as in the following pages) by Professor Corson himself. Those who have heard Professor Corson's extraordinarily sympathetic reading and interpretation of poetry, will easily understand that this occasion gave the impulse to the study of Browning, of which the present work is the outcome.

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## CHAPTER I.

### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS.

THE difficulties which we encounter in attempting to appreciate a classic poet from whom we are separated by a long interval of time, are well known. These difficulties, however, are recognized, and for the reader who is earnestly bent on understanding and appreciating a great writer of the past, there are helps of all kinds. Criticism in the lapse of ages has sufficiently determined what we are to look for in such a poet, what we are to admire, what we are to recognize as faulty, what is worthy of repeated perusal, what may be glanced at or omitted. In the case of a poet of our own time, none of these points have been settled. If, indeed, he is one who follows the beaten track, we have no great difficulty in applying for ourselves the old canons of criticism; but if he is a strikingly original worker, we are all at sea. Criticism does not precede, but follows art; it is the artist that widens the sphere, and to the new facts which the artist forces upon him the critic slowly adjusts himself. When we approach a new and original artist, our rules do not apply, our prepossessions are shocked, we know not whether to admire or condemn. Of a classic

author, we know both the merits and defects. We are aware that Shakespeare's diction is sometimes turgid, that he occasionally sins against good taste, that he is frequently obscure; and we know where these defects are present. But in a new poet the apparent sin may be against our individual taste, not against the rules of art; the obscurity may lie in our own dulness, not in the poet. We must give all points, therefore, painful and impartial consideration. Most great poets are uneven; some of their works may be scarce worth reading: for the classics criticism has marked these off. But no matter how voluminous our new original poet is, we dare not pass lightly over any work. Who knows but careful study may find it a masterpiece? We are thus compelled to endure all his prolixity, his experiments, his failures; and the weariness and distaste so begotten are apt to blind us to his beauties and his greatness. The task of keeping the mind open and impartial is for most a difficult one. If we could but fix our original poet at once, stamp him as bad or good! But no, the greatest poets have great defects. Or if we could be but certain (and we can be fairly so in the classics) that here the poet is defective, and not our taste at fault, that there he is splendid, though we may be inappreciative!

There is no poet of our time more original, be that originality good or bad, than Browning, — no poet, therefore, in whose case the disadvantages alluded to are more apparent. There is no poetry on which opinions are so much divided, none so at variance with preconceived ideas, none, therefore, which it is so difficult fairly to appreciate. There is no poet of our time so uneven, none so voluminous, none so obscure. There is no poet, then, who so much needs an interpreter. It is the aim of the present volume in some measure to obviate these difficulties. The

writer is, of course, no more qualified to give judgment on disputed points than the rest of the world. He has merely the advantage of having closely and fully studied his author, and of having made himself acquainted with criticisms on Browning widely scattered in magazines and collected essays. It would nevertheless have been unnatural, and indeed impossible, to avoid giving his own judgment on Browning's excellences and defects, and abundant evidence will be found in these pages that the writer has not attempted to do so. These opinions may go for what they are worth. The value of the present attempt is expected to be found in its giving a compendious view of Browning's peculiarities, showing the reader what he is to look for in Browning's poetry, and what he need not expect; in unfolding such a consecutive view of Browning's leading ideas and aims as may be necessary for the understanding of his work; and finally in giving and elucidating such a series of extracts as may set the reader in the proper path for appreciating the poet, and studying him further. There can be no doubt that many a reader has been repelled from Browning through unfortunately attempting to make his acquaintance in such poems as *Sordello*, *Fifine*, or in one of his enigmatic shorter pieces, without having the clue for understanding their significance.

In this opening chapter a survey of Browning's most pervading and striking peculiarities is given, and an attempt made to account for them. The student of Browning is thus prepared for what awaits him, and is secured in some measure against the irritation begotten by the presence of oddities and uglinesses which are apparently the result of caprice.

It has come to be a truism in our day that a man's work is determined, not only by the character of his genius, but

also by the conditions of his age. A Darwin may be born in any age; but if he is to make great advances in science, he must be born in a time favorable to scientific pursuits. Homer would not write a great epic, were he alive now; nor Shakespeare, great dramas. For the production of works of the highest class in any department, there is need, not merely of an individual possessing the highest endowments for that species of work, but also of an age and external circumstances in the highest degree favorable to the exercise of those endowments. And this influence of the age limits the artist in points where, perhaps, we might little expect it. It prescribes, for example, the subject of art. The time imposed one task on Phidias and his contemporaries, — that of producing ideally beautiful types of the human form; another and very different one on Raphael and his fellows, — that of representing the conceptions of an ascetic religion, the body worn by spiritual and physical conflict, where the beauty of the outward man was often sacrificed to the perfection of the soul within. It by no means follows that Phidias would have attained the highest excellence in the second period, or Raphael in the first. In poetry, also, it is true, if less obvious, that the subject is within certain limits prescribed. The early Greek dramatists were confined to the traditional stories of the gods and heroes of their race, — confined by the overwhelming attraction these stories had for their audience, and by the national and religious aspects of the Greek stage.

There is a further limitation of subject, not at all affecting these earliest dramatists, but of the greatest importance in considering a late poet like Browning, — the narrowing of the field of art through preoccupation, — the exhaustion by earlier workers of any subject, or method

of treatment. We may again illustrate from plastic art. Sculpture, whose main aim is the presentation in marble of ideally perfect types of the human form, was the first of the plastic arts to reach perfection. Its proper subject — that in which its greatest triumphs were won — is the whole figure. The face is of no overwhelming importance; on the contrary, it has been observed that Greek statues which happen to lack the head, lose comparatively little. But when the face is left out of consideration, the ideally perfect types of manhood and womanhood which the general figure is fitted to express, are soon exhausted, and were practically exhausted in the classic age of Greek sculpture. Subsequent artists were driven to subjects unfitted for marble, or to exaggerated types like the Farnese Hercules, and art declined, as it always does when it clings to an exhausted field. Before another great art epoch could arise, it was necessary that a new theme should be found.

Now, the natural course of the human mind, as illustrated by all arts and sciences, is from the simple and general to the complex and detailed. So it is because sculpture is, of the plastic arts, the one best fitted to express simple and general types, that it was the first to reach perfection. Thereafter, art had to advance a step in complexity, and give individual characterization to representations of men and women, — to picture, not general types, but typical individuals. Such characterization is found mainly in the minute lines of the face, and such types are often morally, rather than physically, beautiful. On both accounts marble was not a fit medium; and when, in the Middle Ages, a demand arose for this kind of representation, recourse was had to painting. So a second great art epoch came into existence, that of the Old Masters, whose

works both in complexity of composition, and in minutiæ of characterization, far surpass the works of the age of Pericles. But here again, when the subject — the picturesque presentation of the central scenes of Christianity — was exhausted, decline followed.

Turning now to the drama, we find an analogous development. It began in the grand general types of character presented in the works of Æschylus and Sophocles. But the nobly impressive figures afforded by Greek tradition were easily exhausted; and already Euripides was forced to lend novelty by exaggeration, or to introduce characters unsuited to the treatment of the Greek stage. To these works of Æschylus and Sophocles the works of the second great period of dramatic development — the one to which Shakespeare belongs — bear a relation analogous to that of the painting of the Renaissance to the sculpture of Phidias. We have no longer the simple grouping of two or three figures, and these figures are no longer merely sketched in broad outlines; but we have, in the works of Shakespeare, a reproduction of the most complex situations of human life, and the characters are most minutely elaborated presentations of typical individuals. We may illustrate the relation of the ancient to the modern drama by the fact that the Greek actor's face was covered with a mask, which, while it presented the general conception of the character, could not exhibit the changes of expression which correspond to details of feeling; and again, by the fact that the actor's voice, in those vast open-air assemblies, could only have rendered the broad phases of passion, and not the finer play expressed by the intonations of the modern actor's voice.

Having thus seen how conditions external to the artist further and retard his work and determine its nature, let

us examine what effect the conditions of our own age must have on poetic art. The poets of the present century have found a comparatively fresh subject in external nature, and are mainly lyrical. Browning, however, has a decided bent towards the objective presentation of human life, for which the favorite form has been the drama. But Shakespeare's work in this department is so surpassing and extensive that, as Goethe has observed, it has precluded any really successful work in those lines which he followed out. What he left unoccupied was seized by the writers of the last century; and the drama has in England, at present, every appearance of being an exhausted field. Moreover, apart from this consideration, there are reasons enough in the general conditions of the age, and of society in England, why the drama should not be successfully cultivated. The subject of the drama is human life *in movement*, — in other words, action, and character in so far as it is revealed in exterior manifestations. But for dramatic action, the life of to-day is not so favorable as the life of the past. The picturesque actions of life have been largely handed over to society incorporated in government. The injured man does not avenge himself, or if he does so, commands but partial sympathy, through the law-abiding instincts which have grown strong within us. It is government which executes vengeance; and corporate action has not the power of rousing sympathy and interest which individual action possesses. Again, character is not made apparent through exterior manifestations as it once was. We do not burst into tears as did Homer's heroes. The whole force of social discipline is employed to repress manifestations of feeling. In society, our utterances must be tempered to the demands of politeness; gesture is a violation of decorum, even the

play of feature and expression is checked. But frank speech, gesture, and expression are, to the drama, the very breath of life; while the self-control and subdued conventional bearing of English society of to-day are fatal to it. It is recorded that Queen Elizabeth occasionally struck her courtiers in the face, and Essex drew his sword and swore he would not endure her treatment of him. Just as in our costume the picturesqueness of the Middle Ages has departed, and the whole civilized world is rapidly being reduced to one monotonous fashion, in which national and class distinctions are lost, and but little play allowed to individual taste; so in character, the idiosyncrasies of nation, class, and individual are hidden under a common conventional mould. Thus he who attempts to write dramas nowadays, inevitably falls either into pale reflexes of earlier works, or into those exaggerations which characterize periods of artistic exhaustion. He fails in the aim which Shakespeare, through the mouth of Hamlet, has laid down for the drama, "whose end," he says, "both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and *the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.*"

And yet it is not for a moment to be admitted that modern life is less varied and intense than that of earlier periods; but it is not in the outer, but in the inner life that this interest and intensity lie. Mental life is ever becoming more free, more varied, more complex. Here, then, the present age affords, in a detail and fulness which no previous age can rival, a subject for literary art. It is, further, a subject which earlier poets have not exhausted. The most general types of character were treated in the Greek drama. Shakespeare treated, with greater detail and com-

plexity, action, and character as exhibited in action and external manifestations. It remained to make the mind the main subject of presentation, — mental conditions, psychological facts, too subtle to be apparent in the coarse medium of action and ordinary speech. The minute study and analysis necessary for the presentation of such a theme, is in harmony with the prevailing scientific tendency of the time; and there is besides a widespread and unprecedented interest in the inner life. To this tendency and interest, the character of the biographies and autobiographies continually being published bears witness. And it is, possibly, because the novel permits the fullest treatment of psychological life, that the novel is now the most popular form of literature. That novels themselves are becoming more and more dominated by the same tendency, is easily apparent. We have but to compare the works of Scott and Jane Austen with those of George Eliot and W. D. Howells.

Naturally enough, then, Browning, the only great poet of our day who has won his chief triumphs in the objective presentation of life and character, is a man who is possessed of the keenest eye for the inner life, whose interest in outer action is subordinate to an interest in the inner drama of the soul. He is the successor of our great dramatists, and no English poet since Shakespeare has seized and presented views of human life and character with such variety and vividness. But, as was to be anticipated from the character of his age, Browning is no dramatist. The drama is not a fit instrument to reveal the subtler and minuter workings of the mind, with which Browning chiefly deals. In his most successful work, he has resorted to another form of presentation, the Monologue, of which it will be well, before describing it in

general terms, to give a concrete example. The piece entitled *My Last Duchess*, is selected as affording in the smallest compass a most characteristic and successful illustration of Browning's peculiar manner. For the benefit of those unaccustomed to Browning's style, the extract is accompanied by an introduction and running commentary. Browning is so pregnant a writer, indicates so much by a hint, that prolonged and careful study is usually necessary in order to grasp the full significance of his work.

In *My Last Duchess*, two characters are portrayed. One is a beautiful young girl, to whose just opening mind the whole world is full of fresh beauty, to whose unworn sensibilities existence is a joy; whose heart, in its ignorance of the coldness and wickedness of this world, is full of love and clinging trustfulness. The other character, the Duke, is her direct antithesis. Old in years, and older in experience, he is the complex product of a highly artificial state of society. Of noble birth, with external perfection of breeding, possessed of a highly cultivated taste and intellect, he is inwardly the very incarnation of cold and selfish egoism. In him, moreover, a combination of selfishness with pride has begotten that grudging temper which hates happiness in others, and would fain keep its pleasures to itself. He marries this girl. Her freshness and frank happiness, her innocence and sweetness, charm all about her; but the Duke cannot endure that others should enjoy the fragrance and beauty of a rose which he has plucked to be all his own, and he grudges her the pleasure she finds in the simple delights of a world which palls upon his jaded palate. In his own mind, he represents her conduct as unbecoming her position, and determines to put an end to it. Coldly and relentlessly,

the more cruelly that there is no outward violence, he proceeds to shape this tender creature to his own mould, but succeeds only in crushing hope, love, and life out of his young wife. She dies of a broken heart. Thereupon, to fill the vacant place, the Duke enters into negotiations for the daughter of a Count. To complete the arrangements about dowry, etc., a third person visits him on behalf of this Count. To this third person, the Duke shows a portrait of his deceased wife; and here the poem opens. The Duke speaks with all the satisfaction of a connoisseur in the possession of a fine painting, but without trace of the emotions which such a picture might be expected to rouse in a husband: —

> THAT'S my last Duchess painted on the wall,
> Looking as if she were alive. I call
> That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
> Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
> Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
> "Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
> Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
> The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
> But to myself they turned (since none puts by
> The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
> And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
> How such a glance came there; so, not the first
> Are you to turn and ask thus.

The words enclosed in brackets give a characteristic touch of the dog-in-manger spirit of the Duke; he keeps the picture veiled, grudging the pleasure it would give to others.

The painter had been successful in catching the characteristic expression of the young Duchess, — the bright

soul, with unconscious and unsuppressed revelation of its inner depths, looks out on the world in earnest interest. So full of self-revelation and feeling was the expression, that a stranger might suspect some tender relation between sitter and painter; the husband, therefore, names the artist Frà Pandolf, whose well-known character would preclude any such suspicion, and goes on further to account for the expression.

Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat:" such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

The poet finely throws out a suggestion of her beauty for the imagination to work on, in the beautiful lines 17–19.

In the passage which follows, the artistic power and brevity of the poet are apparent in the way in which the Duke, while describing his wife, is made to reveal his own character: —

Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace — all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men, — good! but thanked
Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old-name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech — (which I have not) — to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark" — and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
— E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

Observe the impatient anger of "some officious fool" (l. 27), and in lines 30 ff. one feels anger welling out, though repressed by the politeness and cold temperament of the Duke.

The impatient question, "Who'd blame this sort of trifling?" is characteristic of Browning's style. He thus, without making the second person speak, enables us to perceive his influence on the course of the monologue.

Browning merely indicates action or leaves it wholly to the reader's imagination. In the following passage we must supply action suited to the words. The two gentlemen rise and proceed towards the staircase, and the Duke returns to a topic which has evidently been broken off to look at the picture, — viz., his approaching marriage. This exhibition of his late wife's picture, while engaged in a discussion with regard to the dowry of the next, is another fine touch.

Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir.

The predominating importance of the dowry is evident in the very disclaimer. At line 53 they reach the top of the staircase. The stranger, who is of course the Duke's social inferior, will not go first, and the considerate manners which are often linked with a hollow heart, are indicated by the Duke's "Nay, we'll go together down, sir."

Passing a window, the Duke, in the following lines, points to a statue in the court; and in a final touch the poet gives us a glimpse of the pride of the virtuoso, which peeps through the assumed modesty of "thought a rarity."

Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

With this example in our minds, let us proceed to examine the general characteristics of Browning's favorite method. As is illustrated in the poem just read, the depicting of character and of psychological situation is his main object; the story is only indicated in order to throw light upon the personages. The specific charm of a story or drama, plot development, is quite neglected, the interest of the writer being centred on the course of the inner, not of the outer life. The inner life, however, is not perceptible to the outsider, except in general results, and these are not minute enough to reveal the ultimate processes of the

mind. No person is naturally, or can artistically be supposed to be, fully acquainted with a course of thought, except the person in whose brain it is evolved. The novelist's plan of relating, in the third person, the inner life, without attempting to account for his knowledge of it, is unnatural and inartistic. The dramatists, who occasionally found it necessary that their audience should know more of the minute processes of a character's mind than action or natural speech would reveal, resorted to soliloquy, *i.e.*, to making the character think aloud, — a device whose unnaturalness custom has taught us to overlook. A mere stream of thinking, however, such as soliloquy is, is essentially formless, unmoulded by any organic principle. Browning, therefore, has in very many cases chosen a form against which this objection cannot be urged — the monologue. The monologue is addressed to a second person, is therefore accounted for, — *motivirt*, as the Germans say. It further receives organic structure from being shaped to some definite object which the speaker has in view in addressing a second person. By making this aim, as Browning usually does, a far-reaching and comprehensive one, — a defence, for example, of the speaker's course of life, or of some characteristic opinion, — the speaker is naturally and necessarily made to reveal his innermost soul. This is to a certain degree true of the poem just read, which is an implicit defence by the Duke of his conduct towards his wife. But more striking examples will be found everywhere in Browning's works. *Paracelsus, Bishop Blougram, Andrea del Sarto, Fifine, Aristophanes' Apology, Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau*, may be mentioned as examples. Perhaps there is no better illustration of how effective and subtle an instrument this is, in Browning's hands, for the revelation of character, than his longest work, *The Ring and the Book.*

This favorite method of our poet has, however, its inevitable drawbacks. In the first place, in order to give an accurate picture of mental processes, a keen and searching analysis is necessary; and the utterer of the monologue must, of course, be credited with making this. But only highly intellectual and acute minds are capable of such a feat. Hence arises a feeling of dramatic impropriety, when simple girls, and other characters in whom this analytic and reflective tendency is unnatural, are represented as unfolding their mental processes in this way. And so we have the oft-repeated complaint of the critics that, behind the mask, one hears the voice of Browning himself. Thus much of his own personality he must infuse into his characters. An illustration of this defect may be found in the poem entitled *Caliban*, in which this half-man, half-brute of Shakespeare's fancy gives expression to his idea of God. The conception which such a creature might form, is most graphically and strikingly given. But what in Caliban would have been vague semi-conscious feeling, the poet must, perforce, represent as definitely elaborated thought, of which Caliban was quite incapable. It is, therefore, in characters of an intellectual type, — characters of the type of Bishop Blougram, — that the poet attains his most complete success.

There is a second objection to Browning's favorite method. Language presents ideas to the mind in succession, and hence is fitted for the presentation of movement, of a series of events, — unlike painting, which presents, not what is successive, but what is simultaneous. The drama takes advantage of the peculiarity of spoken or written art, and presents movement, — a plot developing, persons acting. Browning's form loses this advantage; his persons do not appear acting, nor their characters developing.

Browning paints them at rest, as it were; gives a portrait of the mind; and, using speech, has to give in succession parts whose significance cannot be fully apprehended until we have some conception of the whole. Now, although it may be argued that this is true of the drama also, — that the full significance of a speech, a scene, is not apparent until we are acquainted with the whole play, — there is this important difference between the two cases. A play is constructed organically, grows naturally before our eyes; each speech, each scene, since the parts of a play correspond to parts in nature, is a whole in itself and has a beauty of its own. But the parts in Browning's poems do not correspond to parts in nature; they are arbitrary sections, like the pieces of a child's puzzle-picture, which have no beauty or fitness, save when we see them in relation to the whole. From this close dependence of the parts upon the whole, arises that groping, confused state of mind which one is apt to experience in reading a piece of Browning's for the first time. The mind, not fully comprehending the ideas, must hold them in suspense until the end is reached. To this is owing in no small degree the obscurity with which Browning is so often charged; and to illustrate obscurity arising from this source the following poem, in which is depicted not a character, but a psychological situation, is cited.

### A WOMAN'S LAST WORD.

I.

LET'S contend no more, Love,
  Strive nor weep:
All be as before, Love,
  — Only sleep!

II.

What so wild as words are?
  I and thou
In debate, as birds are,
  Hawk on bough!

III.

See the creature stalking
  While we speak!
Hush and hide the talking,
  Cheek on cheek.

IV.

What so false as truth is,
  False to thee?
Where the serpent's tooth is,
  Shun the tree —

V.

Where the apple reddens,
  Never pry —
Lest we lost our Edens,
  Eve and I.

VI.

Be a god and hold me
  With a charm!
Be a man and fold me
  With thine arm!

VII.

Teach me, only teach, Love!
  As I ought
I will speak thy speech, Love,
  Think thy thought —

VIII.

Meet, if thou require it,
  Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
  In thy hands.

IX.

That shall be to-morrow,
  Not to-night:
I must bury sorrow
  Out of sight:

X.

— Must a little weep, Love,
  (Foolish me!)
And so fall asleep, Love,
  Loved by thee.

On first reading this poem most persons will fail to catch not only the connection of the various thoughts, but also the general situation. The following paraphrase attempts to give both; but as the poem depicts an extremely complex condition of feeling, its characteristic excellence vanishes in the coarse prose rendering; as a picture whose beauty lies in the subtle transition of one shade or tint into another, loses its charm when reduced to the definite outlines of a line engraving.

In this poem a woman addresses her lover. Before she met him she had already loved, and that experience, however it ended, has left an indelible impression on her spirit. Of this her lover has some inkling; and he would fain probe her past, make it his, as her present is his. She, on her side, fears the consequences of such revelations. "Why," she says, (I.) "rake up the past? let us be satisfied with our present happiness. We tempt misfortune in thus

wrangling; the demon of mistrust and jealousy hangs over us, ready to destroy our love (II., III.). Be not so eager to know the truth of my past life, now no longer true since it represents me as not yours. As amidst the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge lurked the serpent which destroyed Eve's paradise, so in this knowledge which you seek, lurks danger to the paradise of our love (IV., V.). Why this anxiety about my being wholly yours? Yours I must be if you but exert your power. Do not pry into the past, but teach me for the future, and I will lose myself wholly in you" (VI., VII., VIII.). But even in giving utterance to these last words, she feels the past assert its power over her soul; and in the inconsistency between the feeling of yearning and sadness for the past, and the happiness and love of the present lies the pathetic force, — that strange touch of nature that goes direct to the heart,—and the poem reaches a psychological climax in the mingled pathos and content of the closing stanzas, "That shall be to-morrow," etc.

We now pass to another characteristic of Browning's genius and work. An interest in events, in the actions of men, is universal in human nature. On the contrary, an interest in the anatomizing and laying bare of the workings of the mind is a scientific tendency, shared only by the intellectual few. The exhibition of life, of this ever-varying and many-colored scene of human joys and sorrows, struggles and toils, is something which appeals to men by the very constitution of their nature. It requires no intellectual attitude of mind, no power of analysis to follow with interest the representations of human life in epic or drama. It is an emotional, not an intellectual attitude we assume when we are wrapped in the fortunes of Lear, of Juliet, of Othello; whereas in

the analysis of the workings of the mind the reasoning and observing powers are dominant, and emotion is but secondarily stimulated. A man, then, who is successful in making this analysis, and reproducing it, must be one in whom intellect is in the ascendant. Such is pre-eminently the case with Browning. He is a keen and subtle observer, with a scientific delight in detecting and exposing the finest fibres of the mind. As he watches the world about him, he is too intent on seizing indications of the hidden play of cause and effect in the brain, to be carried away by sympathy, and to lose the sense of his identity in the scene before him. But it is this very capacity of losing one's self in one's subject, this power of imagination in virtue of which we identify ourselves with the feelings of another, that make the supreme poet, — that enables him to reproduce with overpowering truth a character or emotion that is not his own. This cannot be the case with Browning from the very nature of the subject-matter to which he has applied himself. Were he dominatd by emotion, by interest in outer action, he could not produce his subtle renderings of the inner life. The age imposes its subject, and the subject in turn imposes its method; the successful poet must be in harmony with both.

The intellectual attitude which Browning exhibits in depicting subtleties of character and psychological situations, being unfavorable to emotion, unfits him for giving expression to moods; in other words, unfits him for lyrical poetry. We trace the same temperament in his descriptions of nature, in which he does not render the general atmosphere of the scene, — does not submit himself to it, and allow himself to absorb its general character; but, active and keenly observant, reproduces the projecting points of the landscape, and striking details with minute accuracy.

The background, the general atmosphere, which blends these into unity, he commonly neglects. And so Browning does not excel in the lyric or song, which is the poetical expression of a dominating feeling. His most successful songs are not truly lyrical, but dramatic. That is to say, the poet does not give expression to his own feelings, but, standing outside his theme, conceives how some other mind would have expressed itself under the influence of a given mood. The interest of such a song lies rather in its dramatic than in its lyrical character; the person represented as uttering it is more interesting to us than the sentiment he utters. We enjoy the poem when we have caught the dramatic conception, rather than, as in the true lyric, when we have caught the mood.

Here, for example, in the *Cavalier Song* about to be cited, the poet manages to bring before his reader's eyes an animated picture. The speaker is a typical cavalier of the days of Charles I., imbued with the sentiment of personal devotion to the king which characterized his party. And well may he be so: for, as we gather from the poem, his ancient house has been raised from decay, and enriched by the bounty of the king, to whom he owes everything, and for whom — now that evil days are come for royalty — he gladly sacrifices it all. Nay, more than that, his boy, his darling and pride, has fallen in the cause, captured and shot by the troopers of Noll, as he contemptuously styles the great Oliver. The time is the very height of the Civil War, when the issue still hangs in the balance. The scene we must picture is a banqueting hall, whose roof re-echoes to the crashing of glasses, and to the shouts of enthusiastic cavaliers, as they respond to the toast of their comrade: —

I.

King Charles, and who'll do him right now?
King Charles, and who's ripe for a fight now?
Give a rouse: here's, in Hell's despite now,
King Charles!

II.

Who gave me the goods that went since?
Who raised me the house that sank once?
Who helped me to gold I spent since?
Who found me in wine you drank once?

(CHORUS) *King Charles, and who'll do him right now?*
*King Charles, and who's ripe for a fight now?*
*Give a rouse: here's, in Hell's despite now,*
*King Charles!*

III.

To whom used my boy George quaff else,
By the old fool's side that begot him?
For whom did he cheer and laugh else,
While Noll's damned troopers shot him?

(CHORUS) *King Charles, and who'll do him right now?*
*King Charles, and who's ripe for a fight now?*
*Give a rouse: here's, in Hell's despite now,*
*King Charles!*

Browning's lyrics draw attention to a point that might have been noted earlier. It is in lyrics, most of all, that we look for perfection in the garb of poetry, — in versification, language, and rhythm, — for felicity and ease of expression. In Browning's lyrics these are conspicuously lacking, as they are, to a less noticeable degree, in his other works. It is true that in the piece just quoted, and in some others, there is a swing and animation in metre, which partially compensates for such defects; but this

swing is rarely attained, and, in any case, there remains a harshness of consonantal combination which seems to be natural to Browning. His lyrical metres are nearly always jerky, his rhymes often fairly astounding in their uncouthness. He introduces into serious poems combinations like "dab brick" and "fabric," which had hitherto been employed for comic effect. In diction and phrase there is much of the same uncouthness. In his higher passages, he seems to be struggling with only partial success to express his meaning; elsewhere he appears wantonly to exaggerate the natural oddities of his utterance. There can be found in his works few, if any, passages, which produce that impression of perfect workmanship, to which passages in Shakespeare, Milton, or Wordsworth so often give rise.

The sources of these peculiarities are doubtless also in some measure traceable to the nature of Browning's subject-matter and of his genius. Both genius and subject are, as we have seen, unfavorable to the complete absorption of the poet's individuality in the creations of his imagination. Now the highest poetry is written under the influence of poetic inspiration. The imagination acts so powerfully that the poet, being completely absorbed in his subject, is no longer conscious of the working of his reasoning and constructive powers. He seems to himself to be merely the medium of some higher influence. We have the testimony of several great poets that this is their experience in producing their best work. Goethe says as much in his conversations with Eckermann. Wordsworth tells how from time to time as he wrote, this feeling of inspiration came over him; and Wordsworth is remarkable for occasional passages in which expression seems to be absolutely perfect, and which produce the impression (as both

Mr. Lowell and Mr. Matthew Arnold have observed) that Nature herself is writing without the intervention of the poet's mind. As complete absorption seems to be a factor in perfection of expression, we may naturally conclude that, conversely, its absence, as in the case of Browning, will result in defective expression, — the conscious struggle of the poet to represent his thought, being apparent to the reader in the harsh and ill-moulded form.

Even apart from his oddities of expression and versification, there is a tendency in Browning to the out-of-the-way in subject and illustration. With regard to the former, it may be said that, just as dramatists usually choose as their theme some striking situation, some clash of circumstances; so the poet of the mind must select striking psychological situations, — the clash of opposing tendencies in the mind, the almost paradoxical co-existence of conflicting characteristics and emotions. And with regard to his figures, the poet may plead that, in these latter days when by long use obvious comparisons have grown trite, oddity serves to give that vividness which it is the very object of figurative language to attain.

These last-named peculiarities, as well as others we have noted, find illustration in the short selection with which this chapter concludes. In the first place, the poem places before us a curious mental situation, — curious because of the incongruity between the condition of the speaker, who is a dying man, and the thoughts with which he is busied; yet we cannot but feel, as we read, that, though the state of mind may be unusual, we have here a true touch of nature. And besides, the very contrast between the present condition of the speaker, and the past which he so vividly recalls, lends an exquisite depth of pathos to this little piece. In the second place, we have

the grotesque use of the row of medicine bottles to make clear the scene which the dying man beholds with his inner eye. He addresses a clergyman by his bedside, who has just been suggesting a conventional thought.

### CONFESSIONS.

I.

WHAT is he buzzing in my ears?
 "Now that I come to die,
Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"
 Ah, reverend sir, not I!

II.

What I viewed there once, what I view again,
 Where the physic bottles stand
On the table's edge, — is a suburb lane
 With a wall to my bedside hand.

III.

That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,
 From a house you could descry
O'er the garden-wall: is the curtain blue
 Or green to a healthy eye?

IV.

To mine, it serves for the old June weather
 Blue above lane and wall;
And that farthest bottle labelled "Ether"
 Is the house o'er-topping all.

V.

At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
 There watched for me, one June,
A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,
 My poor mind's out of tune.

VI.

Only, there was a way . . . you crept
  Close by the side, to dodge
Eyes in the house, two eyes except:
  They styled their house "The Lodge."

VII.

What right had a lounger up their lane?
  But, by creeping very close,
With the good wall's help, — their eyes might strain
  And stretch themselves to Oes,

VIII.

Yet never catch her and me together,
  As she left the attic, there,
By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"
  And stole from stair to stair,

IX.

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,
  We loved, sir — used to meet:
How sad and bad and mad it was —
  But then, how it was sweet!

— (*Dramatis Personæ*, p. 162.)

# CHAPTER II.

## BROWNING'S PHILOSOPHY.

HAVING in the preceding chapter attempted to point out, and in some measure account for Browning's most characteristic and pervading peculiarities in subject, treatment, and form, we now proceed to examine his works in regard to certain special aspects. The present chapter, in the first place, presents a view of what may be called, for lack of a better term, Browning's philosophy. It is a side which bulks more largely, and has greater interest in the case of Browning than of most poets, on account of the existence in him of that scientific and philosophic bent which has already made itself manifest both in his choice of subject and in its treatment.

There is a good deal of the metaphysician in Browning. He is not a poet who, struck by the beauty and emotional interest of the various scenes of human life, poetically reproduces them in a series of pictures, without thought of the general truths which they illustrate. On the contrary, it is a striking mark of his mental character that for him the apparently trifling and ordinary events of life are pregnant with abstract teaching, and have a high worth as manifestations of universal truths. In this tendency Browning again shows himself a child of his age, — is an exemplification of the self-conscious, probing spirit of the time. He is not content to accept the beauty about him, and the interplay of human life for their own sake merely. Beneath them, he seeks for the general truths which they

embody. In his poems the task he sets before him is not merely that of depicting life and character; he also brings forward and exemplifies, in these concrete pictures, some far-reaching general truth. Browning is, then, in some degree, a philosopher—an expounder of an abstract system; and for the proper understanding of much of his poetry, a knowledge of the main outlines of his system is necessary.

It is a recognized truth of psychology that men's perceptions of an object are by no means wholly determined by the object itself. The images in the brain of an ordinary layman and of a skilled anatomist, as they view the same dissected limb, are very different. The man of taste and culture sees something invisible to the uneducated peasant, in the painting of a great master. What we see is what we have been trained to see, and what in virtue of our temperament catches our attention. If this be true in the case of single simple objects (and it is true to an extent which most people have never realized), in a much greater degree must it be true when the object in question is the whole complex universe. In so vast an array of objects and qualities, we unconsciously select and dwell upon those which are in harmony with our inner self. The problems of philosophy are too complex for the application throughout of strictly logical methods, equally valid for all minds. The solutions, therefore, into which an ever-varying subjective factor enters, must necessarily vary. And so Browning's view of God, of Nature, of Man, is determined by his temperament, by the fact that his mind's eye is quicker to observe certain kinds of phenomena than others. His philosophy is involved in the tendency we have already had occasion to emphasize,—the tendency to fix the attention on the inner rather than the outer life, the life of the soul rather than on visible phenomena. "My stress," he

says in his dedication of *Sordello*, "lay on the incidents in the development of the soul; little else is worth study." Now the tendency to dwell on the inner rather than on the outer life, on mind rather than on matter, on the consciousness of self rather than on the consciousness of something outside self, has always, in the history of thought, marked the idealist in opposition to the materialist. Browning is, then, an idealist, something even of a transcendentalist.

If we accept the division of the universe into physical and spiritual, we note a striking difference between the two sides. The physical world is under the domination of natural law; it moves in certain uniform grooves. In the spiritual world there *seems* at least to be a striking contrast to this state of things; those who maintain otherwise have not yet demonstrated their thesis. To men in general, this characteristic of the physical world which science is so clearly impressing on the minds of this generation, — the rule of law, — is in its unrelenting uniformity the very antithesis of the spiritual, of all we connect with the idea of personality. The epithet "impersonal" comes naturally to our minds when we conceive physical force. When, on the other hand, we think of the spiritual world, of the world of persons as opposed to the world of force and matter, the prominent differentiating characters are two. In the first place, we find an element of originative force, and hence of freedom and uncertainty; — in short, of those attributes which, whether really existent or not, each man seems to feel within himself, and which we name Will. In the second place, we find the element of emotion, an element which seems as essential to personal action as it is inconsistent with the great controlling forces of material nature. The manifestations of will and emotion, the two differentiating and essential qualities of that spiritual and personal

world in which Browning is interested, are, accordingly, the phenomena which most easily arrest and hold his mental eye. Even in material nature, where our age in general can only see the uniform action of impersonal law, he feels the presence of emotion:—

The centre-fire heaves underneath the earth,
And the earth changes like a human face;
The molten ore bursts up among the rocks,
Winds into the stone's heart, outbranches bright
In hidden mines, spots barren river-beds,
Crumbles into fine sand where sunbeams bask—
God joys therein! The wroth sea's waves are edged
With foam, white as the bitten lip of Hate,
When in the solitary waste, strange groups
Of young volcanoes come up, cyclops-like,
Staring together with their eyes on flame;—
God tastes a pleasure in their uncouth pride!
Then all is still: earth is a wintry clod;
But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passes
Over its breast to waken it; rare verdure
Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between
The withered tree-roots and the cracks of frost,
Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face;
The grass grows bright, the boughs are swoln with blooms
Like chrysalids impatient of the air;
The shining dorrs are busy; beetles run
Along the furrows, ants make their ado;
Above, birds fly in merry flocks—the lark
Soars up and up, shivering for very joy;
Afar the ocean sleeps; white fishing-gulls
Flit where the strand is purple with its tribe
Of nested limpets; savage creatures seek
Their loves in wood and plain; and God renews
His ancient rapture! —(*Paracelsus*, V.)

Nature to Browning is no vast machine rolling inexorably on its destined path, behind which, if there be any force which we can call God, he is far removed and works on us only through secondary causes, uniform and predictable. On God manifest in law, the God of Western science and logic, Browning's poetry does not much dwell, but rather on the God of Eastern thought, the God of religion who is not far from any one of us. Like his own Luria, who represents the Eastern world, Browning feels the immediate presence of a personal divinity.

"My own East!" [says Luria]
"How nearer God we were! He glows above
With scarce an intervention, presses close
And palpitatingly, His soul o'er ours:
We feel Him, nor by painful reason know!
The everlasting minute of creation
Is felt there; now it is, as it was then;
All changes at his instantaneous will,
Not by the operation of a law
Whose maker is elsewhere at other work.
His soul is still engaged upon his world —
Man's praise can forward it, Man's prayer suspend,
For is not God all-mighty? To recast
The world, erase old things, and make them new,
What costs it Him? —(*Luria*, p. 284.)

It is not for a moment to be insinuated that Browning does not recognize the other aspect of Nature, does not accept the general results of science; but, unlike his age, it is not this side which attracts him most. We look in vain in Browning's poetry for an expression of the pervading scientific enthusiasm which glories in our rapid advance in the knowledge and command of material nature,

and in the prospect thus unfolded of the future well-being of the race. For that we must go to Tennyson.

Again, while to science man is but a part of nature, and, whether in regard to space or time, occupies but a small angle in the horizon; to Browning nature is but an adjunct to man, who is the head and centre of things,

> — the consummation of this scheme
> Of being, the completion of this sphere
> Of life.

Further, it is not man in the mass, that most interests him, not the social and political progress of the race, but the life and destiny of the individual. There he finds character, will, emotion — all that seems to him most worthy of study.

It is manifest that a great difficulty presents itself to one who thus regards the individual soul as the highest thing in the world, for whose development the world itself exists. From his point of view, the world is apparently a failure. The soul's highest aspirations are unsatisfied, its destiny unrounded. By struggle, by suffering, the soul may indeed be perfected; but this precious product seems carefully elaborated only to perish. The work is thrown away; the struggle finds no reward. This thought the poet has dramatically embodied in *Cleon*, one of the poems contained in *Men and Women.*

The picturesque frame which the poet has chosen for the presentation of the thought of this poem, is admirably adapted to its purpose. Cleon, who is to typify the highest development of which the individual man is capable in this world, is the consummate flower of the most perfect, if not the highest, civilization which the world has seen. He is a Greek of the beginning of our era, the complex product of

that many-sided culture which belongs to the last phase of the intellectual life of Greece. As poet, artist, philosopher, he unites in himself all the intellectual aptitudes of man; and each of these has been brought to the highest perfection compatible with the equilibrium of the whole. In each of these departments his creative efforts have attained success, and he enjoys fame and favor alike among the masses and the cultivated few. Material aids to felicity are not wanting. He is surrounded by beauty; all means to sensuous pleasure are at his disposal. If there is any satisfaction in life, surely he has found it. So, at least thinks the great and fortunate King Protus, who, feeling the inadequacy, as regards happiness, of his own successful career, and the need of some consolation in the face of inevitable death, writes to inquire if Cleon's life has brought him satisfaction. The poem is Cleon's epistle in reply. Browning, in introducing Protus, exhausts, as it were, the possibilities of life. If neither Protus, the successful man of action who possesses power and the other substantial aims of life, nor Cleon, the contemplative spirit, king in the creative realm of the thinker and artist, has found satisfaction here for the aspirations of the soul, the solution of the problem must be sought elsewhere.

The quotation prefixed to the poem indicates the point from which Cleon's reasonings start; — he believes in one God, whose children we are. This seems so clear and so fundamental a fact to Browning, that he rarely, if ever, represents in his personages a scepticism which attacks it, or attempts to discuss it. The opening paragraphs strike a note of sensuous richness, which instils a sense of beauty of the world, and of Cleon's keen appreciation of it.

## CLEON.

"As certain also of your own poets have said" —[1]

CLEON the poet, (from the sprinkled isles,
Lily on lily, that o'erlace the sea,
And laugh their pride when the light wave lisps "Greece") —
To Protus in his Tyranny: much health!

They give thy letter to me, even now:
I read and seem as if I heard thee speak.
The master of thy galley still unlades
Gift after gift; they block my court at last
And pile themselves along its portico
Royal with sunset, like a thought of thee;
And one white she-slave, from the group dispersed
Of black and white slaves, (like the chequer-work
Pavement, at once my nation's work and gift
Now covered with this settle-down of doves)
One lyric woman, in her crocus vest
Woven of sea-wools, with her two white hands
Commends to me the strainer and the cup
Thy lip hath bettered ere it blesses mine.

Well-counselled, king, in thy munificence!
For so shall men remark, in such an act
Of love for him whose song gives life its joy,
Thy recognition of the use of life:
Nor call thy spirit barely adequate
To help on life in straight ways, broad enough
For vulgar souls, by ruling and the rest.
Thou, in the daily building of thy tower, —
Whether in fierce and sudden spasms of toil,

[1] Acts xvii. 28, "As certain of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring."

Or through dim lulls of unapparent growth,
Or when the general work 'mid good acclaim
Climbed with the eye to cheer the architect, —
Didst ne'er engage in work for mere work's sake —
Hadst ever in thy heart the luring hope
Of some eventual rest a-top of it,
Whence, all the tumult of the building hushed,
Thou first of men mightst look out to the East:
The vulgar saw thy tower, thou sawest the sun.
For this, I promise on thy festival
To pour libation, looking o'er the sea,
Making this slave narrate thy fortunes, speak
Thy great words, and describe thy royal face —
Wishing thee wholly where Zeus lives the most,
Within the eventual element of calm.

Neither Protus, then, nor Cleon could rest satisfied with mere activity. They felt the need of an aim and outcome to life.

Thy letter's first requirement meets me here.
It is as thou hast heard: in one short life
I, Cleon, have effected all those things
Thou wonderingly dost enumerate.
That epos on thy hundred plates of gold
Is mine, and also mine the little chant
So sure to rise from every fishing-bark
When, lights at prow, the seamen haul their net.
The image of the sun-god on the phare,
Men turn from the sun's self to see, is mine;
The Pœcile, o'er-storied its whole length,
As thou didst hear, with painting, is mine too.
I know the true proportions of a man
And woman also, not observed before;
And I have written three books on the soul,

Proving absurd all written hitherto,
And putting us to ignorance again.
For music, — why, I have combined the moods,
Inventing one. In brief, all arts are mine;
Thus much the people know and recognize,
Throughout our seventeen islands.

Note in the above passage the many-sidedness of Cleon's nature, his capacity for enjoying and appreciating all that earth affords. This type of character is not only suited to Browning's ulterior purpose in the poem, but also in keeping with the era and country to which Cleon is assigned. Although in this poem, character-painting holds a secondary place, and the chief interest is reserved for the topic under discussion; yet through almost unperceptible touches we feel the man Cleon behind his letter — highly-cultured, dignified, self-conscious, egoistic, with a certain lack of animation, an exhaustion which is apt to characterize individuals and ages of high culture. There is just a touch of tediousness too, in admirable keeping with the rest of his character.

He goes on, in the passage which follows, to explain his own greatness as compared with the greatness of the men of earlier ages, and is so led to demonstrate that progress is the law of this world — progress from the simple to the complex.

Marvel not!
We of these latter days, with greater mind
Than our forerunners, since more composite,
Look not so great, beside their simple way,
To a judge who only sees one way at once,
One mind-point and no other at a time, —
Compares the small part of a man of us
With some whole man of the heroic age,

Great in his way — not ours, nor meant for ours.
And ours is greater, had we skill to know:
For what we call this life of men on earth,
This sequence of the soul's achievements here,
Being, as I find much reason to conceive,
Intended to be viewed eventually
As a great whole, not analyzed to parts,
But each part having reference to all, —
How shall a certain part, pronounced complete,
Endure effacement by another part?
Was the thing done? — then, what's to do again?
See, in the chequered pavement opposite,
Suppose the artist made a perfect rhomb,
And next a lozenge, then a trapezoid —
He did not overlay them, superimpose
The new upon the old and blot it out,
But laid them on a level in his work,
Making at last a picture; there it lies.
So first the perfect separate forms were made,
The portions of mankind; and after, so,
Occurred the combination of the same.
For where had been a progress, otherwise?
Mankind, made up of all the single men, —
In such a synthesis the labor ends.
Now mark me! those divine men of old time
Have reached, thou sayest well, each at one point
The outside verge that rounds our faculty;
And where they reached, who can do more than reach?
It takes but little water just to touch
At some one point the inside of a sphere,
And, as we turn the sphere, touch all the rest
In due succession: but the finer air
Which not so palpably nor obviously,
Though no less universally, can touch
The whole circumference of that emptied sphere,

Fills it more fully than the water did;
Holds thrice the weight of water in itself
Resolved into a subtler element.
And yet the vulgar call the sphere first full
Up to the visible height — and after, void;
Not knowing air's more hidden properties.
And thus our soul, misknown, cries out to Zeus
To vindicate his purpose in our life:
Why stay we on the earth unless to grow?
Long since, I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
That he or other god descended here
And, once for all, showed simultaneously
What, in its nature, never can be shown
Piecemeal or in succession; — showed, I say,
The worth both absolute and relative
Of all his children from the birth of time,
His instruments for all appointed work.
I now go on to image, — might we hear
The judgment which should give the due to each,
Show where the labor lay and where the ease,
And prove Zeus' self, the latent everywhere!
This is a dream: — but no dream, let us hope,
That years and days, the summers and the springs,
Follow each other with unwaning powers.
The grapes which dye thy wine, are richer far
Through culture, than the wild wealth of the rock;
The suave plum than the savage-tasted drupe;
The pastured honey-bee drops choicer sweet;
The flowers turn double, and the leaves turn flowers;
That young and tender crescent-moon, thy slave,
Sleeping above her robe as buoyed by clouds,
Refines upon the women of my youth.
What, and the soul alone deteriorates?
I have not chanted verse like Homer, no —
Nor swept string like Terpander, no — nor carved

And painted men like Phidias and his friend:
I am not great as they are, point by point.
But I have entered into sympathy
With these four, running these into one soul,
Who, separate, ignored each other's art.
Say, is it nothing that I know them all?
The wild flower was the larger; I have dashed
Rose-blood upon its petals, pricked its cup's
Honey with wine, and driven its seed to fruit,
And show a better flower if not so large:
I stand myself. Refer this to the gods
Whose gift alone it is! which, shall I dare
(All pride apart) upon the absurd pretext
That such a gift by chance lay in my hand,
Discourse of lightly or depreciate?
It might have fallen to another's hand: what then?
I pass too surely: let at least truth stay!

It will be noted that while Cleon is an advance in complexity on his predecessors, he is in each department less perfect than they. His progress in knowledge and sympathy has outstripped the capacity to realize his conceptions.

We now come to the main subject of the epistle.

And next, of what thou followest on to ask.
This being with me as I declare, O king,
My works in all these varicolored kinds,
So done by me, accepted so by men —
Thou askest, if (my soul thus in men's hearts)
I must not be accounted to attain
The very crown and proper end of life?
Inquiring thence how, now life closeth up,
I face death with success in my right hand:
Whether I fear death less than dost thyself
The fortunate of men? "For" (writest thou)

"Thou leavest much behind, while I leave nought.
"Thy life stays in the poems men shall sing,
"The pictures men shall study; while my life,
"Complete and whole now in its power and joy,
"Dies altogether with my brain and arm,
"Is lost indeed; since, what survives myself?
"The brazen statue to o'erlook my grave,
"Set on the promontory which I named.
"And that — some supple courtier of my heir
"Shall use its robed and sceptred arm, perhaps
"To fix the rope to, which best drags it down.
"I go then: triumph thou, who dost not go!"

Protus, then, has found that life is vanity. Has Cleon's experience been different? The answer is a full one. Cleon shows by general considerations that, instead of a man of his advanced type finding life more satisfactory than ordinary men, life in his case must be a more complete failure. To demonstrate this, he first asserts, in the following passage, that lower animals are in their way perfect. But they lack self-consciousness. They simply enjoy; they are not aware of, they have no power to reflect on their capacities and joys. Here man is superior to them.

Nay, thou art worthy of hearing my whole mind.
Is this apparent, when thou turn'st to muse
Upon the scheme of earth and man in chief,
That admiration grows as knowledge grows?
That imperfection means perfection hid,
Reserved in part, to grace the after-time?
If, in the morning of philosophy,
Ere aught had been recorded, nay perceived,
Thou, with the light now in thee, couldst have looked
On all earth's tenantry, from worm to bird,

Ere man, her last, appeared upon the stage —
Thou wouldst have seen them perfect, and deduced
The perfectness of others yet unseen.
Conceding which, — had Zeus then questioned thee
"Shall I go on a step, improve on this,
"Do more for visible creatures than is done?"
Thou wouldst have answered, "Ay, by making each
"Grow conscious in himself — by that alone.
"All's perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,
"The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims
"And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight,
"Till life's mechanics can no further go —
"And all this joy in natural life, is put,
"Like fire from off thy finger into each,
"So exquisitely perfect is the same.
"But 'tis pure fire, and they mere matter are:
"It has them, not they it; and so I choose
"For man, thy last premeditated work
"(If I might add a glory to the scheme),
"That a third thing should stand apart from both,
"A quality arise within his soul,
"Which intro-active, made to supervise
"And feel the force it has, may view itself,
"And so be happy." Man might live at first
The animal life: but is there nothing more?
In due time, let him critically learn
How he lives; and, the more he gets to know
Of his own life's adaptabilities,
The more joy-giving will his life become.
Thus man who hath this quality, is best.

But this advance in man over the beast is a source of imperfection and pain; for through it we become conscious of joys outside of us, and of desires in the soul for making these joys ours, while our capacity for doing so is in no way

increased. There is disproportion between the desires and needs of the soul, and our means of fulfilling them.

> But thou, king, hadst more reasonably said:
> "Let progress end at once, — man make no step
> "Beyond the natural man, the better beast,
> "Using his senses, not the sense of sense."
> In man there's failure, only since he left
> The lower and inconscious forms of life.
> We called it an advance, the rendering plain
> Man's spirit might grow conscious of man's life,
> And, by new lore so added to the old,
> Take each step higher over the brute's head.
> This grew the only life, the pleasure-house,
> Watch-tower and treasure-fortress of the soul,
> Which whole surrounding flats of natural life
> Seemed only fit to yield subsistence to;
> A tower that crowns a country. But alas,
> The soul now climbs it just to perish there!
> For thence we have discovered ('tis no dream —
> We know this, which we had not else perceived)
> That there's a world of capability
> For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,
> Inviting us; and still the soul craves all,
> And still the flesh replies, "Take no jot more
> "Than ere thou clombst the tower to look abroad!
> "Nay, so much less as that fatigue has brought
> "Deduction to it." We struggle, fain to enlarge
> Our bounded physical recipiency,
> Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,
> Repair the waste of age and sickness: no,
> It skills not! life's inadequate to joy,
> As the soul sees joy, tempting life to take.
> They praise a fountain in my garden here
> Wherein a Naiad sends the water-bow

Thin from her tube; she smiles to see it rise.
What if I told her, it is just a thread
From that great river which the hills shut up,
And mock her with my leave to take the same?
The artificer has given her one small tube
Past power to widen or exchange — what boots
To know she might spout oceans if she could?
She cannot lift beyond her first thin thread:
And so a man can use but a man's joy
While he sees God's. Is it for Zeus to boast,
"See man, how happy I live, and despair —
"That I may be still happier — for thy use!"
If this were so, we could not thank our lord,
As hearts beat on to doing: 'tis not so —
Malice it is not. Is it carelessness?
Still, no. If care — where is the sign? I ask,
And get no answer, and agree in sum,
O king, with thy profound discouragement,
Who seest the wider but to sigh the more.
Most progress is most failure: thou sayest well.

So we see the advance of man over the beasts is of the same character as the advance of Cleon over his predecessors. There is in both cases an increased knowledge of ourselves and our capacities. There is an increase in desires and capacities; but not a proportional increase in our means of gratifying the first, and of giving play to the second. Beasts are more perfect in their narrow sphere than man; Homer and Terpander, than Cleon. Progress, then, though the law of the world and the instinctive need of our nature, involves more thorough failure.

Neither does the power of imagination free us from our limitations, and enable us to partake of joys we cannot grasp in reality, as even Cleon with his creative imagination acknowledges: —

The last point now: — thou dost except a case —
Holding joy not impossible to one
With artist-gifts — to such a man as I
Who leave behind me living works indeed;
For, such a poem, such a painting lives.
What? dost thou verily trip upon a word,
Confound the accurate view of what joy is
(Caught somewhat clearer by my eyes than thine)
With feeling joy? confound the knowing how
And showing how to live (my faculty)
With actually living? — Otherwise
Where is the artist's vantage o'er the king?
Because in my great epos I display
How divers men young, strong, fair, wise can act —
Is this as though I acted? if I paint,
Carve the young Phœbus, am I therefore young?
Methinks I'm older that I bowed myself
The many years of pain that taught me art!
Indeed, to know is something, and to prove
How all this beauty might be enjoyed, is more:
But, knowing nought, to enjoy is something too.
Yon rower, with the moulded muscles there,
Lowering the sail, is nearer it than I.
I can write love-odes: thy fair slave's an ode.
I get to sing of love, when grown too gray
For being beloved: she turns to that young man,
The muscles all a-ripple on his back.
I know the joy of kingship: well, thou art king!

Nor does Cleon find any consolation in the species of immortality to which the modern Positivist looks forward.

"But," sayest thou — (and I marvel, I repeat,
To find thee tripping on a mere word) "what
"Thou writest, paintest, stays; that does not die!

"Sappho survives, because we sing her songs,
"And Æschylus, because we read his plays!"
Why, if they live still, let them come and take
Thy slave in my despite, drink from thy cup,
Speak in my place. Thou diest while I survive?
Say rather that my fate is deadlier still,
In this, that every day my sense of joy
Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;
While every day my hair falls more and more,
My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—
The horror quickening still from year to year,
The consummation coming past escape,
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy—
When all my works wherein I prove my worth,
Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,
Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,
I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so over-much,
Sleep in my urn.

From such a conclusion the human heart instinctively revolts; and in the premonition and longing there implanted, Browning sees an indication of the true solution of the difficulty,—personal immortality.

It is so horrible,
I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,
—To seek which, the joy-hunger forces us:
That, stung by straitness of our life, made strait
On purpose to make prized the life at large—
Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,

We burst there as the worm into the fly,
Who, while a worm still, wants his wings. But no!
Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas,
He must have done so, were it possible!

Note, in connection with these last two lines, the fine and tragic irony which Browning infuses into the following paragraph. That which might have given shape and assurance to the dim longings of Cleon's heart, Cleon, who had worn life out in mastering all knowledge, and who still found the essential thing wanting, passes by, with neglect and contempt.

Live long and happy, and in that thought die,
Glad for what was! Farewell. And for the rest,
I cannot tell thy messenger aright
Where to deliver what he bears of thine
To one called Paulus; we have heard his fame
Indeed, if Christus be not one with him —
I know not, nor am troubled much to know.
Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew
As Paulus proves to be, one circumcised,
Hath access to a secret shut from us?
Thou wrongest our philosophy, O king,
In stooping to inquire of such an one,
As if his answer could impose at all!
He writeth, doth he? well, and he may write.
Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! certain slaves
Who touched on this same isle, preached him and Christ;
And (as I gathered from a bystander)
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.

Browning thus dramatically and indirectly, as is his wont, indicates what he deems the true solution of the difficulty. A mind of his type finds no refuge from the crushing

despondency begotten at the view of the foiled, imperfect life of the soul, in the enthusiasm of the Positivist, who is content to accept the imperfection and sacrifice of the individual life as a factor in working out the ultimate perfection of the race. Still less disposed is he to rest satisfied with the Materialist's view, who considers it natural and fitting that so insignificant a part of the universe as man should, having contributed his small quota to the development of the whole, perish forever. For Browning, with his estimate of the worth of spiritual life and of the individual soul, the natural and satisfying solution is found in a personal immortality. This idea of immortality is a fundamental one with him, and he returns to it again and again. The light that this idea casts on the problems of life, and the vigor and hopefulness it imparts, is presented in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, which should be read in connection with *Cleon*, as affording the complementary picture to it.

With immortality in view, the meaning and use of life become at once apparent: —

> Life is probation, and the earth no goal,
> But starting point of man.

Browning counts —

> life just the stuff
> To try the soul's strength on, educe the man.

Development, that pervading thought of our century, enters here into Browning's system; but, characteristically enough, it is not with him the development of the race through a series of individuals, but of the individual through a series of existences. The soul he conceives as passing through sphere after sphere, of which the present life forms one, —

> Spiral on spiral, gyres of life and light
> More and more gorgeous.

In each, it is hampered by the conditions which pertain to that particular sphere; in this life, for example, by those we call bodily or material. By struggle with these, the soul is rendered more perfect, and, when these fall away, finds itself fitted for the higher phase of existence into which it passes. That imperfection, then, of which Cleon speaks, — that disproportion between our aspirations, and our ability to realize them, — belongs to the very essence of man, and is a proof of his higher destiny. In that very imperfection lies the possibility of progress, and progress consists in a nearer and nearer approximation to the unconditional and absolute, — that is, to God.

Man is not God but hath God's end to serve,
A master to obey, a course to take,
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become.
Grant this, then man must pass from old to new,
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
From what once seemed good, to what now proves best.
How could man have progression otherwise?

* * * * * *
* * By such confession straight he falls
Into man's place, a thing nor God nor beast,
Made to know that he can know and not more:
Lower than God who knows all and can all,
Higher than beasts which know and can so far
As each beast's limit, perfect to an end,
Nor conscious that they know, nor craving more;
While man knows partly but conceives beside,
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
And in this striving, this converting air
Into a solid he may grasp and use,
Finds progress, man's destructive mark alone,
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,

Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.
Such progress could no more attend his soul
Were all its struggles after found at first
And guesses changed to knowledge absolute,
Than motion wait his body, were all else
Than it the solid earth on every side,
Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.
—(*A Death in the Desert*, pp. 142–4.)

Such being the end of man, the direst sin he can commit against his own nature, and the Divine purpose, is to fall into supine and sluggish indifference; to dull his spiritual aspirations, to find a plenitude of satisfaction in the joys of the present life. On the other hand, everything is supremely valuable which tends to rouse him from this apathy, to make him feel the insufficiency of this life, and the need of something beyond.

This is the source of Browning's peculiar way of regarding passion, which forms so striking, and to many so repugnant, an element in his poetry. Passion, with its illimitable and insatiable cravings, is for him at once a pledge of the future possibilities of the soul, and the spur which urges it on to preparation for them. The passionate soul seizes on one after another of the unsatisfying joys of the world, till it rises to the conception and desire of the absolute and divine.

A searching and impetuous soul
* * * * * *
Might seek somewhere in this blank life of ours
For fit delights to stay its longings vast;
And grappling nature, so prevail on her
To fill the creature full she dared to frame
Hungry for joy; and, bravely tyrannous

Grow in demand, still craving more and more,
And make each joy conceded prove a pledge
Of other joy to follow — bating nought
Of its desires, still seizing fresh pretence
To turn the knowledge and the rapture wrung
As an extreme, last boon, from Destiny,
Into occasion for new covetings,
New strifes, new triumphs. —(*Paracelsus*, V.)

The proper attitude of man is one of eager, strenuous exertion. The hero in Browning's eyes is he whose every muscle is tense in the struggle for the attainment of some object beyond him. That he should grasp it, is not to be expected. But what matter? In the halting verses of *Pacchiarotto*, —



'Tis work for work's sake that he's needing:
Let him work on and on as if speeding
Work's end, but not dream of succeeding!
Because if success were intended,
Why, heaven would begin ere earth ended.

Here is another idea which under various forms pervades the thought of the day, — the idea of culture, that the perfection of man is higher than any external result. Man is —

Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain
The good beyond him, — which attempt is growth.

Imbued with such conceptions, Browning is naturally more lenient to sins of passion, which, as most fatal to the social fabric, society sternly condemns, than to sins of coldness, of selfish prudence, which society overlooks. Browning deems the latter the more heinous, inasmuch as

they are more deadly in their effects on the individual soul. Hence it comes that, to use the words of Mr. W. L. Courtenay, "With him, as with Euripides, the humanity that he paints is not the dignified, selfish man of Tennyson and Sophocles, with views on 'the decorous' and 'the befitting,' and a conventional regard for respectable deportment, whether towards himself or towards the gods; but the wilder, less commonplace, higher developed human being, who hates with a will and loves with a will, regardless of consequences, who cannot deceive himself, and despises external morality,—a humanity which dares and sins and suffers, and makes mock, if need be, of gods and heaven." And again, "Not for Browning the beauty of repose; the still, quiet lights of meditation, removed from the slough and welter of actual struggle, make no appeal to him; the apathetic calm of the normal human being, exercised on daily, uninteresting tasks, is to him well-nigh incomprehensible." [1]

If we turn to the poem called *The Statue and the Bust*, we find an illustration of Browning's estimate of the worth of effort and action, as compared with sluggishness and feebleness of purpose. There the story is told of a bride in Florence, who, on the day she was to wed a man whom she did not love, and who was in every way unsuited to her, saw from her window the Duke as he passed. He, too, caught sight of her, and a glance was sufficient to kindle and reveal mutual love. Each resolves to gratify the unlawful passion, but each procrastinates, allowing the littlenesses of the passing day to delay the momentous step. And so days pass into months, and months into years, and the desire and intention are still cherished; until suddenly they awake to the fact that youth and beauty have faded,

[1] Robert Browning as a Writer of Plays, *Fortnightly Review*, 1883.

and the time for passion has forever passed. Over this story the poet moralizes: —

So! While these wait the trump of doom,
How do their spirits pass, I wonder,
Nights and days in the narrow room?

Still, I suppose, they sit and ponder
What a gift life was, ages ago,
Six steps out of the chapel yonder.

Only they see not God, I know.
Nor all that chivalry of his,
The soldier-saints, who, row on row,

Burn upward each to his point of bliss —
Since, the end of life being manifest,
He had burned his way thro' the world to this.

I hear you reproach, "But delay was best,
For their end was a crime." — Oh, a crime will do
As well, I reply, to serve for a test,

As a virtue golden through and through,
Sufficient to vindicate itself
And prove it's worth at a moment's view!

Must a game be played for the sake of pelf?
Where a button goes, 'twere an epigram
To offer the stamp of the very Guelph.

The true has no value beyond the sham:
As well the counter as coin, I submit,
When your table's a hat, and your prize, a dram.

Stake your counter as boldly every whit,
Venture as warily, use the same skill,
Do your best, whether winning or losing it,

If you choose to play! — is my principle.
Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

The counter, our lovers staked, was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin:
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is — the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.
You of the virtue (we issue join)
How strive you? *De te, fabula!*

—(*Dramatic Romances*, p. 188.)

Not that Browning would condone the purposed sin; but, as far as the inner life of the individual is concerned, the sin has already been committed; whereas the weakness in the face of petty difficulties, the inability to struggle energetically towards the aim, is a sufficient indication of the lack of that strenuous ardor which, in the poet's opinion, is the fundamental requisite in developing man according to the divine plan.

Of all the passions, none so reaches out towards the infinite as love. For Browning, then, as well as Plato, love both symbolizes and arouses that thirst for the infinite which is the primary need of humanity. There is something mystic and transcendental in the power of love. The perfection of body and soul with which the lover's imagination endows the loved one, is represented in *Fifine*, not as an unreal halo, but as the result of the deeper insight which love bestows, — an insight which penetrates the veil of time and matter, and sees the original type which the

soul dimly shadows forth amidst the imperfections of the present order of things. Here, as elsewhere, the attainment of the aim — the successful issue of the passion — is an insignificant matter in comparison with the gain which the spiritual discipline of love confers upon the soul. So Valence, in *Colombe's Birthday*, believing that his lady has preferred another, does not on that account grieve that his heart is irretrievably hers. Nay, he rejoices in the hopeless passion, finds in the complete self-abnegation which it demands, an ennobling and invigorating spiritual force.

Had I seen such an one,
As I loved her — weighing thoroughly that word —
So should my task be to evolve her love:
If for myself! — if for another — well!
*Berthold.* Heroic truly! And your sole reward, —
The secret pride in yielding up love's right.
*Valence.* Who thought upon reward? And yet how much
Comes after — oh, what amplest recompense!
Is the knowledge of her, nought? the memory, nought?
— Lady, should such an one have looked on you,
Ne'er wrong yourself so far as quote the world,
And say, love can go unrequited here!
You will have blessed him to his whole life's end —
Low passions hindered, baser cares kept back,
All goodness cherished where you dwelt — and dwell.
What would he have? He holds you — you, both form
And mind, in his, — where self-love makes such room
For love of you, he would not serve you now
The vulgar way, — repulse your enemies,
Win you new realms, or best, to save the old
Die blissfully — that's past so long ago!
He wishes you no need, thought, care of him —
Your good, by any means, himself unseen,
Away, forgotten! — (*Colombe's Birthday*, p. 165.)

The same idea of the worth of love in itself, is embodied in *Evelyn Hope* and *Cristina*. On the other hand, the most deadly sin that can be committed in this sphere, is the stifling of passion from low motives of worldly prudence. In *Dis Aliter Visum*, *Youth and Art*, etc., the poet teaches that the man or woman who does so, inflicts an irreparable blow on spiritual development.

The mention of Plato reminds us of the resemblance between his point of view and Browning's. Both are idealists and transcendentalists; and Browning's earliest poem, *Pauline*, indicates the attraction which the works of the great Athenian had for him. But the Platonism of Browning is most apparent in his view of this world as an imperfect shadow of an absolute universe beyond. The whole philosophy of Browning is permeated by the conception of the relative and the absolute. In this world there is only relative beauty, relative truth, relative good. To the soul, however, belongs an innate thirst for the absolute; and these temporal representatives of it have worth only in so far as they help the soul on towards the conception of what is absolutely beautiful, true, and good. So, for example, the soul contemplating the different forms of the lovely and beautiful which our earth affords, may rise by degrees to the conception of the perfection and love of God.

Fresh births of beauty wake
Fresh homage, every grade of love is past,
With every mode of loveliness; then cast
Inferior idols off their borrowed crown
Before a coming glory. Up and down
Runs arrowy fire, while earthly forms combine
To throb the secret forth; a touch divine —
And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod;
Visibly through the garden walketh God.

— (*Sordello*, p. 70.)

So, likewise, to the soul belongs the heritage of truth. The soul, in virtue of its essence, possesses all truth, but, as Plato explains in the *Euthydemus*, only potentially. It is only for exceptional individuals, and on exceptional occasions, that truth is set free, and from being a potential, becomes an actual possession.

> Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
> From outward things, whatever you may believe;
> There is an inmost centre in us all,
> When truth abides in fulness; and around
> Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
> This perfect, clear perception — which is truth:
> A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
> Blinds it, and makes all error: and, "*to know*"
> Rather consists in opening out a way
> Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape,
> Than in effecting entry for a light
> Supposed to be without. Watch narrowly
> The demonstration of a truth, its birth,
> And you trace back the effluence to its spring
> And source within us, where broods radiance vast,
> To be elicited ray by ray, as chance
> Shall favor. —(*Paracelsus*, I.)

Hence it is that Browning has much greater confidence in those truths which he considers to be intuitive, such as the conviction of immortality (cf. *La Saisiaz*), than in those which are based on logical processes.

The same theory accounts for the existence of evil. Evil is merely the imperfection which clings to the passing world of *simulacra*, — the obstacle by conflict with which the soul attains its requisite development. It is the Divine purpose that man should pursue these shadows as strenu-

ously as if they were real. But evil being an essential element in the present world, he does not thereby attain the ostensible end of annihilating it, but the greater end of developing himself. There is danger to the individual in perception of this great truth of the relative and necessary character of evil, unless he perceives also the complementary truth of the necessity of struggle against it. The two poems entitled *Pisgah-Sights* present these two sides. The relativity of evil is especially apparent at the approach of death, when bodily limitations are passing from the soul, and the limitations of the new sphere have not yet enclosed it. On the eve of death the speaker in the *Pisgah-Sights*, I., as Sordello under similar circumstances, sees that all works together for good.

I.

OVER the ball of it,
  Peering and prying,
How I see all of it,
  Life there, outlying!
Roughness and smoothness,
  Shine and defilement,
Grace and uncouthness;
  One reconcilement.

II.

Orbed as appointed,
  Sister with brother
Joins, ne'er disjointed
  One from the other.
All's lend-and-borrow;
  Good, see, wants evil,
Joy demands sorrow,
  Angel weds devil!

III.

"Which things must — *why* be?"
Vain our endeavor!
So shall things aye be
As they were ever.
"Such things should *so* be!"
Sage our desistence![1]
Rough-smooth let globe be,
Mixed — man's existence!
—(*Pacchiarotto and Other Poems.*)

[1] The sentiment in this line is dramatic only — not Browning's.

# CHAPTER III.

## CHRISTIANITY AS PRESENTED IN BROWNING'S WORKS.

Although Browning is, as every one must be, the child of his age, he is, notwithstanding, as we have seen in the last chapter, in many points out of sympathy with, or in opposition to, its dominant tendencies. Like Carlyle, he is an idealist and transcendentalist in the midst of a materialistic and rationalistic generation. It will further be noted that he approximates to characteristically Christian ways of thinking in those particulars in which he departs from the standpoint of his age;—in his insistence upon a personal God, manifesting himself in personal qualities, upon a God who is in immediate contact with us, rather than upon one acting merely through natural law; in the prime importance which he assigns to the individual soul; in his predominant interest in its destiny; in his consequent dwelling upon, and confidence in, a future life; in his presentation of this life as a scene of probation and preparation for a higher and better one; in his neglect of the theme of man's material progress; in his comparative lack of interest in the future condition of the race in this world; in short, in the overwhelming interest and importance which the spiritual and inner life has above the material and outer. Moreover, there is, in his way of estimating individual character, a close resemblance to the Christian method. As we saw, he does not select for approval the man who is simply blameless in his social relations, who leads a decent

life, and does not come into conflict with law, or the conventions of society. There is something more essential than this — an eager, strenuous, all-subduing enthusiasm for something higher; an emotional condition which nothing finite can ever satisfy, and which must therefore lead ultimately to the absolute and infinite. So Jesus had applied to men a test which selected as His followers not necessarily those of irreproachable life, — nay, found to meet its requirements so many of the outcasts of society, that He incurred the reproach of being the companion of publicans and sinners. He, too, looked for an inner, ofttimes hidden spring of enthusiasm, — an unquenchable aspiration after something higher and better, which, once aroused, could be satisfied by no conformity with mere outward law, such as the Pharisees found sufficient. He recognized that in the very fineness and richness of the highest natures, there lies the double possibility of surpassing excellence or of surpassing evil; while cold, calculating mediocrity is incapable of either. In short, much of Browning's philosophy is a restatement of the old truths of Christianity from the standpoint and in the language of the Nineteenth century. This is a task for which his intellectual appreciation of the thought of to-day, and his constitutional sympathy with the fundamental conceptions of Christianity, peculiarly qualify him. The present chapter outlines the aspect of Christianity which we find emphasized in Browning's poems.

We have already noted how natural and necessary to Browning's way of thinking is the existence of a personal God. He accepts this as a fundamental fact of consciousness, no less evident than his own existence, and no less incapable of proof. That this God is also a God of power and intelligence, he finds sufficiently evidenced in the

natural world. But, upon God's goodness and love, the inextricable mingling of evil and suffering which we find in the constitution of this universe, may, as it seems to him, not unreasonably cast doubt. And here, accordingly, Browning first attempts demonstration. First of all, just as in *Cleon* he presented the instinctive need and yearning of the human heart for immortality, so here he concretely presents its need and longing for a God of love. This point is set forth especially in the two fine poems, entitled *Saul*, and *An Epistle*. The latter we proceed to quote.

The *Epistle* depicts the effect that his coming in contact with Lazarus some years after the miraculous resurrection of the latter had upon Karshish, a distinguished Arab physician. Karshish is a typical representative of the scientific intellect, bent on positive and practical results. As this type of character is unfavorable to the existence of the feeling which is to be depicted, the poet selects it in order to exhibit the universality of the yearning in the human heart for a God of love; just as in Cleon he was careful to select a character that might most appropriately and strongly exhibit the truth which was there to be enforced. Upon the scientific spirit of our own times, the poem before us has, of course, a bearing, none the less effective because, after Browning's favorite method, dramatic and oblique. In Karshish himself we have an admirable piece of portraiture; the struggle between intellectual habits and the instincts of the heart is presented with the hand of a master. In addition, the poem contains an interesting and ingenious study of the condition of Lazarus, — of the psychological results which so abnormal an experience as his might have upon subsequent life. The epistle is written from Bethany by Karshish soon after his meeting with Lazarus. He addresses Abib, his former teacher, a

famous physician and scientist. The fulness of minute detail in the opening paragraphs, which serves to give reality to the scene, should be noted.

## AN EPISTLE

### CONTAINING THE STRANGE MEDICAL EXPERIENCE OF KARSHISH, THE ARAB PHYSICIAN.

KARSHISH, the picker-up of learning's crumbs,
The not-incurious in God's handiwork
(This man's-flesh he hath admirably made,
Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
To coop up and keep down on earth a space
That puff of vapor from his mouth, man's soul)
— To Abib, all-sagacious in our art,
Breeder in me of what poor skill I boast,
Like me inquisitive how pricks and cracks
Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain,
Whereby the wily vapor fain would slip
Back and rejoin its source before the term, —
And aptest in contrivance (under God)
To baffle it by deftly stopping such : —
The vagrant Scholar to his Sage at home
Sends greeting (health and knowledge, fame with peace)
Three samples of true snake-stone — rarer still,
One of the other sort, the melon-shaped,
(But fitter, pounded fine, for charms than drugs)
And writeth now the twenty-second time.

My journeyings were brought to Jericho :
Thus I resume. Who studious in our art
Shall count a little labor unrepaid?
I have shed sweat enough, left flesh and bone
On many a flinty furlong of this land.
Also, the country-side is all on fire

With rumors of a marching hitherward;
Some say Vespasian cometh, some, his son.
A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls:
I cried and threw my staff and he was gone.
Twice have the robbers stripped and beaten me,
And once a town declared me for a spy;
But at the end, I reach Jerusalem,
Since this poor covert where I pass the night,
This Bethany, lies scarce the distance thence
A man with plague-sores at the third degree
Runs till he drops down dead. Thou laughest here!
'Sooth, it elates me, thus reposed and safe,
To void the stuffing of my travel-scrip
And share with thee whatever Jewry yields.
A viscid choler is observable
In tertians, I was nearly bold to say;
And falling-sickness hath a happier cure
Than our school wots of: there's a spider here
Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,
Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-gray back;
Take five and drop them . . . but who knows his mind,
The Syrian runagate I trust this to?
His service payeth me a sublimate
Blown up his nose to help the ailing eye.
Best wait: I reach Jerusalem at morn,
There set in order my experiences,
Gather what most deserves, and give thee all —
Or I might add, Judea's gum-tragacanth
Scales off in purer flakes, shines clearer-grained,
Cracks 'twixt the pestle and the porphyry,
In fine exceeds our produce. Scalp-disease

28. This marks the time. It was just before the destruction of Jerusalem.

29–30. This is a characteristic piece of description. By seizing a detail or two, the Poet puts a picture very vividly and powerfully before our eyes.

Confounds me, crossing so with leprosy —
Thou hadst admired one sort I gained at Zoar —
But zeal outruns discretion. Here I end.

The physician comes out in the peculiar method of indicating distance (l. 37), and the scientific zeal, in the humorous touch of l. 60.

In what follows we see the shame under which Karshish labors at allowing his critical and scientific mind to be so impressed by the events he is about to relate. He professes fear that, unless he writes immediately, the case of Lazarus may escape his memory. We shall see, before the end of the epistle, evidence enough that this fear is assumed.

Yet stay: my Syrian blinketh gratefully,
Protesteth his devotion is my price —
Suppose I write what harms not, though he steal?
I half resolve to tell thee, yet I blush,
What set me off a-writing first of all.
An itch I had, a sting to write, a tang!
For, be it this town's barrenness — or else
The Man had something in the look of him —
His case has struck me far more than 'tis worth.
So, pardon if — (lest presently I lose,
In the great press of novelty at hand,
The care and pains this somehow stole from me)
I bid thee take the thing while fresh in mind,
Almost in sight — for, wilt thou have the truth?
The very man is gone from me but now,
Whose ailment is the subject of discourse.
Thus then, and let thy better wit help all!

'Tis but a case of mania — subinduced
By epilepsy, at the turning-point

Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:
When, by the exhibition of some drug
Or spell, exorcization, stroke of art
Unknown to me, and which 'twere well to know,
The evil thing out-breaking all at once
Left the man whole and sound of body indeed,—
But, flinging (so to speak) life's gates too wide,
Making a clear house of it too suddenly,
The first conceit that entered might inscribe
Whatever it was minded on the wall
So plainly at that vantage, as it were,
(First come, first served) that nothing subsequent
Attaineth to erase those fancy-scrawls
The just-returned and new-established soul
Hath gotten now so thoroughly by heart
That henceforth she will read or these or none.
And first—the man's own firm conviction rests
That he was dead (in fact they buried him)
—That he was dead and then restored to life
By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:
—'Sayeth, the same bade "Rise," and he did rise.
"Such cases are diurnal," thou wilt cry.
Not so this figment!—not, that such a fume,
Instead of giving way to time and health,
Should eat itself into the life of life,
As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones, and all!
For see, how he takes up the after-life.

Karshish accounts for it all in a natural way, with his scientific terms—"a case of mania: subinduced by epilepsy," yet all the while, at the bottom of his heart, he feels the inadequacy of the rationalistic theory.

In the passage we read next, we come to the fine study Lazarus' state of mind. Lazarus, having actually passed another world, and seen those things which are eter-

nal, thoroughly realizes and lives up to the truths, so frequent and often so meaningless on the lips of Christians, — of the nothingness of this world, — of having our hearts and treasures above. He measures everything by the standard which experience of the infinite has taught him to apply. So, the great and small events of external history (as we reckon them) seem to him alike unimportant. The death of his child is for him no cause of sorrow. He realizes that the child has but gone before to a happier and better sphere. But some trifling word or gesture which gives evidence of the presence and power of evil, throws him into an agony of fear. Just as, Karshish goes on to explain, their former teacher, the great sage of the pyramid, would be thrown into a paroxysm of terror by their repeating words of one of his books, trifling and meaningless to them, but which belonged to a charm, as the sage knew, able to upturn the universe from its foundations.

The man — it is one Lazarus a Jew,
Sanguine, proportioned, fifty years of age,
The body's habit wholly laudable,
As much, indeed, beyond the common health
As he were made and put aside to show.
Think, could we penetrate by any drug
And bathe the wearied soul and worried flesh,
And bring it clear and fair, by three days' sleep!
Whence has the man the balm that brightens all?
This grown man eyes the world now like a child.
Some elders of his tribe, I should premise,
Led in their friend, obedient as a sheep,
To bear my inquisition. While they spoke,
Now sharply, now with sorrow, — told the case, —
He listened not except I spoke to him,

But folded his two hands and let them talk,
Watching the flies that buzzed: and yet no fool.
And that's a sample how his years must go.
Look, if a beggar, in fixed middle-life,
Should find a treasure, — can he use the same
With straitened habitude and tastes starved small,
And take at once to his impoverished brain
The sudden element that changes things,
That sets the undreamed-of rapture at his hand,
And puts the cheap old joy in the scorned dust?
Is he not such an one as moves to mirth —
Warily parsimonious, when no need,
Wasteful as drunkenness at undue times?
All prudent counsel as to what befits
The golden mean, is lost on such an one:
The man's fantastic will is the man's law.
So here — we call the treasure knowledge, say,
Increased beyond the fleshly faculty —
Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven:
The man is witless of the size, the sum,
The value in proportion of all things,
Or whether it be little or be much.
Discourse to him of prodigious armaments
Assembled to besiege his city now,
And of the passing of a mule with gourds —
'Tis one! Then take it on the other side,
Speak of some trifling fact, — he will gaze rapt
With stupor at its very littleness,
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed
He caught prodigious import, whole results;
And so will turn to us the bystanders
In ever the same stupor (note this point)
That we too see not with his opened eyes.
Wonder and doubt come wrongly into play,

Preposterously, at cross purposes.
Should his child sicken unto death, — why, look
For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,
Or pretermission of the daily craft!
While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
At play or in the school or laid asleep,
Will startle him to an agony of fear,
Exasperation, just as like. Demand
The reason why — " 'tis but a word," object —
"A gesture" — he regards thee as our lord
Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
We both would unadvisedly recite
Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
Thou and the child have each a veil alike
Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both
Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
Over a mine of Greek fire, did ye know!
He holds on firmly to some thread of life —
(It is the life to lead perforcedly)
Which runs across some vast distracting orb
Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet —
The spiritual life around the earthly life:
The law of that is known to him as this,
His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.
So is the man perplext with impulses
Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,
Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,
And not along, this black thread through the blaze —
"It should be" baulked by "here it cannot be."
And oft the man's soul springs into his face
As if he saw again and heard again

His sage that bade him "Rise" and he did rise.
Something, a word, a tick o' the blood within
Admonishes: then back he sinks at once
To ashes, who was very fire before,
In sedulous recurrence to his trade
Whereby he earneth him the daily bread;
And studiously the humbler for that pride,
Professedly the faultier that he knows
God's secret, while he holds the thread of life.
Indeed the especial marking of the man
Is prone submission to the heavenly will —
Seeing it, what it is, and why it is.
'Sayeth, he will wait patient to the last
For that same death which must restore his being
To equilibrium, body loosening soul
Divorced even now by premature full growth:
He will live, nay, it pleaseth him to live
So long as God please, and just how God please.
He even seeketh not to please God more
(Which meaneth, otherwise) than as God please.
Hence, I perceive not he affects to preach
The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be,
Make proselytes as madmen thirst to do:
How can he give his neighbor the real ground,
His own conviction? Ardent as he is —
Call his great truth a lie, why, still the old
"Be it as God please" reassureth him.
I probed the sore as thy disciple should:
"How, beast," said I, "this stolid carelessness
Sufficeth thee, when Rome is on her march
To stamp out like a little spark thy town,
Thy tribe, thy crazy tale, and thee at once?"
He merely looked with his large eyes on me.
The man is apathetic, you deduce?
Contrariwise, he loves both old and young,

Able and weak, affects the very brutes
And birds—how say I? flowers of the field—
As a wise workman recognizes tools
In a master's workshop, loving what they make.
Thus is the man as harmless as a lamb:
Only impatient, let him do his best,
At ignorance and carelessness and sin—
An indignation which is promptly curbed:
As when in certain travel I have feigned
To be an ignoramus in our art
According to some preconceived design,
And happened to hear the land's practitioners,
Steeped in conceit sublimed by ignorance,
Prattle fantastically on disease,
Its cause and cure—and I must hold my peace!

It must be noted that the case of Lazarus is an exemplification of the truth spoken of at the close of the last chapter. The limitation of our perception of truth is needful in order that the soul, exerting itself to obtain the relative good of the present sphere, may undergo that discipline which is the purpose of the present stage of existence. Lazarus, through his deeper perception of truth, is actually incapacitated for the present world. He is reduced to apathy and inaction. The remainder of his life here is but a half-slumberous waiting for its close, not the strenuous, ardent striving after ever-loftier aims, which the poet lays down as being the highest and most healthful condition of the soul.

Thou wilt object—Why have I not ere this
Sought out the sage himself, the Nazarene
Who wrought this cure, inquiring at the source,
Conferring with the frankness that befits?
Alas! it grieveth me, the learned leech

Perished in a tumult many years ago,
Accused, — our learning's fate, — of wizardry,
Rebellion, to the setting up a rule
And creed prodigious, as described to me.
His death, which happened when the earthquake fell
(Prefiguring, as soon appeared, the loss
To occult learning in our lord the sage
Who lived there in the pyramid alone)
Was wrought by the mad people — that's their wont!
On vain recourse, as I conjecture it,
To his tried virtue, for miraculous help —
How could he stop the earthquake? That's their way!
The other imputations must be lies:
But take one, though I loathe to give it thee,
In mere respect for any good man's fame.
(And after all, our patient Lazarus
Is stark mad; should we count on what he says?
Perhaps not: though in writing to a leech
'Tis well to keep back nothing of a case.)
This man so cured regards the curer, then,
As — God forgive me! who but God himself,
Creator and sustainer of the world,
That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!
—'Sayeth that such an one was born and lived,
Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own house,
Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
And yet was . . . what I said nor choose repeat,
And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
In hearing of this very Lazarus
Who saith — but why all this of what he saith?
Why write of trivial matters, things of price
Calling at every moment for remark?
I noticed on the margin of a pool
Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!

There is a fine unconscious irony in Karshish referring the earthquake which occurred at the crucifixion, to the death of the aforementioned sage of the pyramid (l. 253); in doing so, he affords an example of that credulity to which the scientific mind, in certain circumstances, is open.

Ashamed of the hold which the words of Lazarus have taken upon him, Karshish tries to recover his ordinary standpoint (276 ff.), and turns to matters of real import (unconscious irony again), the existence of "blue-flowering borage," etc. Note the fine ambiguity of the "It is strange."

He goes on to finish the letter in a simulated tone of indifference: —

> Thy pardon for this long and tedious case,
> Which, now that I review it, needs must seem
> Unduly dwelt on, prolixly set forth!
> Nor I myself discern in what is writ
> Good cause for the peculiar interest
> And awe indeed this man has touched me with.
> Perhaps the journey's end, the weariness
> Had wrought upon me first. I met him thus:
> I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
> Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
> A moon made like a face with certain spots
> Multiform, manifold and menacing:
> Then a wind rose behind me. So we met
> In this old sleepy town at unaware,
> The man and I. I send thee what is writ.
> Regard it as a chance, a matter risked
> To this ambiguous Syrian: he may lose,
> Or steal, or give it thee with equal good.
> Jerusalem's repose shall make amends
> For time this letter wastes, thy time and mine;
> Till when, once more thy pardon and farewell!

But at last in the postscript, the genuine feeling breaks forth, — the yearning cry of the human heart for a God of love, the consciousness of the complete satisfaction, the peace, the rest that the knowledge of such a truth would give.

> The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too —
> So, through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
> Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
> Thou hast no power nor may'st conceive of mine,
> But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
> And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
> The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

Attention need scarcely be drawn to the fact that this poem is an admirable example of Browning's characteristic method, described in the first Chapter.

The very existence of the need which the poet finds in mankind, and exemplifies in Karshish, — that God, the all-wise, should be the all-loving too, — is for a transcendentalist, like Browning, an argument for the existence of that which can satisfy the need. He deduces another argument from the constitution of humanity, from the existence of love in men themselves. If God does not possess this quality, the creature is higher than the Creator. The speaker in *Christmas Eve* says: —

> In youth I looked to these very skies,
> And probing their immensities,
> I found God there, His visible power;
> Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
> Of that power, an equal evidence

That his love, there too, was the nobler dower.
For the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless God
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say. —(p. 220.)

Still for this quality there is lacking the fulness of manifestation and proof which we have in the case of the qualities of power and intelligence. This lack Browning finds exactly supplied by the manifestation of God as love which is recorded in the New Testament. It is, therefore, in no subtle system of doctrine, such as Calvinism, for example, presents, that Browning finds the worth of Christianity; but in the fact that it reveals God as a God of love, and, at the same time, affords a sufficient object to draw out worthily, and infinitely the love in man's own heart. The strength and proof of Christianity lies in its correspondence to the needs of the human heart, and in the complete solution it provides for all the difficulties of the universe. Such is the view that the great and good Pope Innocent presents in *The Ring and The Book*. After considering God as manifest in his works, he turns (Book X., l. 1361) to God manifest in Christ : —

Conjecture of the worker by the work :
Is there strength there? — enough : intelligence?
Ample : but goodness in a like degree?
Not to the human eye in the present state,
This isosocele deficient in the base.
What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which this tale supplies
Of love without a limit? So is strength,
So is intelligence; then love is so,

1361. That is — Judge the Creator by the qualities manifested in his work.
1367. "This tale": the story of the Gospels.

Unlimited in its self-sacrifice:
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.
Beyond the tale, I reach into the dark,
Feel what I cannot see, and still faith stands:
I can believe this dread machinery
Of sin and sorrow, would confound me else,
Devised, — all pain, at most expenditure
Of pain by Who devised pain, — to evolve,
By new machinery in counterpart,
The moral qualities of man — how else? —
To make him love in turn and be beloved,
Creative and self-sacrificing too,
And thus eventually God-like, ay,
"I have said ye are Gods," — and shall it be said for naught?
Enable man to wring, from out all pain,
All pleasure for a common heritage
To all eternity: this may be surmised,
The other is revealed, — whether a fact,
Absolute, abstract, independent truth,
Historic, not reduced to suit man's mind, —
Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass
A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye, —
The same and not the same, else unconceived —
Though quite conceivable to the next grade
Above it in intelligence, — as truth
Easy to man, were blindness to the beast
By parity of procedure, — the same truth
In a new form, but changed in either case:
What matter so intelligence be filled?
To the child the sea is angry, for it roars:
Frost bites, else why the tooth-like fret on face?

1375. *I.e.*, of sin and sorrow *which* would, etc.

1386. "This": the explanation of the object of pain just enunciated.

1387. "The other": the manifestation of God as love narrated in the Gospels.

Man makes acoustics deal with the sea's wrath,
Explains the choppy cheek by chymic law, —
To both, remains one and the same effect
On drum of ear and root of nose, change cause
Never so thoroughly: so our heart be struck,
What care I, — by God's gloved hand or the bare?
Nor do I much perplex me with aught hard,
Dubious is the transmitting of the tale, —
No, nor with certain riddles set to solve.
This life is training and a passage: pass, —
Still, we march over some flat obstacle
We made give way before us; solid truth
In front of it, were motion for the world?
The moral sense grows but by exercise.

In lines 1387 ff. the Pope states that he will not attempt to say whether the facts narrated in the Gospels are absolute truth, or truth adapted to man's imperfectly developed intellect. They afford, in any case, all the truth that man is capable of receiving. The result is the same, just as the result is the same whether we suppose that the frost bites us with its tooth, or understand scientifically the way its effect is produced on our cheek. In 1409 ff. the Pope further says that the difficulties which surround Christianity do not trouble him, for this life is the training period of the soul; and difficulties are necessary for spiritual progress. Browning is not, then, disposed to lay stress on the externals of "the tale." Miracles he would not regard as the main support of Christianity. They may indeed have been needful at the first to give Christian doctrine a foothold in the world.

1412–13. That is, if there were solid truth in front of the world, no motion or progress would be possible.

*Now*, by lapse of time, the evidence for miracles has become weakened. What matters it? For us, Christianity is proved by its sufficiency for our needs.

This, and the various other points referred to, are to be found dramatically presented in the mouth of the dying St. John in *A Death in the Desert.*

The opening paragraph of this poem is represented as being written by an early Christian, into whose possession the original manuscript containing the narrative of John's death, has come. He informs us that the author is supposed to be Pamphylax, the Antiochene, and gives an air of reality to the poem by various bibliographical details.

### A DEATH IN THE DESERT.

[SUPPOSED of Pamphylax the Antiochene:
It is a parchment, of my rolls the fifth,
Hath three skins glued together, is all Greek,
And goeth from *Epsilon* down to *Mu*:
Lies second in the surnamed Chosen Chest,
Stained and conserved with juice of terebinth,
Covered with cloth of hair, and lettered *Xi*,
From Xanthus, my wife's uncle, now at peace:
*Mu* and *Epsilon* stand for my own name,
I may not write it, but I make a cross
To show I wait His coming, with the rest,
And leave off here: beginneth Pamphylax.]

The account by Pamphylax begins with a vivid description of the circumstances of John's death:—

4. This line seems to refer to the arrangement of the Mss. in the library, which were marked with Greek letters.

6. "Terebinth": the turpentine tree.

I said, "If one should wet his lips with wine,
And slip the broadest plaintain-leaf we find,
Or else the lappet of a linen robe,
Into the water-vessel, lay it right,
And cool his forehead just above the eyes,
The while a brother, kneeling either side,
Should chafe each hand and try to make it warm, —
He is not so far gone but he might speak."

This did not happen in the outer cave,
Nor in the secret chamber of the rock,
Where, sixty days since the decree was out,
We had him, bedded on a camel-skin,
And waited for his dying all the while;
But in the midmost grotto: since noon's light
Reached there a little, and we would not lose
The last of what might happen on his face.

I at the head, and Xanthus at the feet,
With Valens and the Boy, had lifted him,
And brought him from the chamber in the depths,
And laid him in the light where we might see:
For certain smiles began about his mouth,
And his lids moved, presageful of the end.

Beyond, and halfway up the mouth o' the cave,
The Bactrian convert, having his desire,
Kept watch, and made pretence to graze a goat
That gave us milk, on rags of various herb,
Plaintain and quitch, the rocks' shade keeps alive:
So that if any thief or soldier passed,
(Because the persecution was aware,)
Yielding the goat up promptly with his life,
Such man might pass on, joyful at a prize,
Nor care to pry into the cool o' the cave,
Outside was all noon and the burning blue.

41. "Aware": on the alert.

"Here is wine," answered Xanthus, — dropped a drop;
I stooped and placed the lap of cloth aright,
Then chafed his right hand, and the Boy his left:
But Valens had bethought him, and produced
And broke a ball of nard, and made perfume.
Only, he did — not so much wake, as — turn
And smile a little, as a sleeper does
If any dear one call him, touch his face —
And smiles and loves, but will not be disturbed.

Then Xanthus said a prayer, but still he slept:
It is the Xanthus that escaped to Rome,
Was burned, and could not write the chronicle.

Then the Boy sprang up from his knees, and ran,
Stung by the splendor of a sudden thought,
And fetched the seventh plate of graven lead
Out of the secret chamber, found a place,
Pressing with finger on the deeper dints,
And spoke, as 'twere his mouth proclaiming first,
"I am the Resurrection and the Life."

Whereat he opened his eyes wide at once,
And sat up of himself, and looked at us:
And thenceforth nobody pronounced a word:
Only, outside, the Bactrian cried his cry
Like the lone desert-bird that wears the ruff,
As signal we were safe, from time to time.

First he said, "If a friend declared to me,
This my son Valens, this my other son,
Were James and Peter, — nay, declared as well

59–63. The reference is evidently to plates of metal with John's gospel engraved thereon.

This lad was very John, — I could believe!
— Could, for a moment, doubtlessly believe:
So is myself withdrawn into my depths,
The soul retreated from the perished brain
Whence it was wont to feel and use the world
Through these dull members, done with long ago.
Yet I myself remain; I feel myself:
And there is nothing lost. Let be, awhile!"

John's meaning in these last lines is made clearer by the parenthesis which follows, in which a peculiar theory of the constitution of the soul is ascribed to John, based on the authority of one Theotypas.

[This is the doctrine he was wont to teach,
How divers persons witness in each man,
Three souls which make up one soul: first, to wit,
A soul of each and all the bodily parts,
Seated therein, which works, and is what Does,
And has the use of earth, and ends the man
Downward: but, tending upward for advice,
Grows into, and again is grown into
By the next soul, which, seated in the brain,
Useth the first with its collected use,
And feeleth, thinketh, willeth — is what Knows:
Which, duly tending upward in its turn,
Grows into, and again is grown into
By the last soul, that uses both the first,
Subsisting whether they assist or no,
And, constituting man's self, is what Is —
And leans upon the former, makes it play,
As that played off the first: and, tending up,
Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man
Upward in that dread point of intercourse,
Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him.

What Does, what Knows, what Is; three souls, one man.
I give the glossa of Theotypas.]

The passage which follows contains an idea frequently employed by Browning (cf. close of *Sordello*); viz., that the soul on the eve of dissolution, being in a measure free from bodily hindrances, attains to a clearer and deeper perception of the truth. It rises above the transient, temporal forms which truth assumes, to the perception of permanent and absolute verities.

And then, "A stick, once fire from end to end;
Now, ashes save the tip that holds a spark!
Yet, blow the spark, it runs back, spreads itself
A little where the fire was: thus I urge
The soul that served me, till it task once more
What ashes of my brain have kept their shape,
And these make effort on the last o' the flesh,
Trying to taste again the truth of things —"
(He smiled) — "their very superficial truth;
As that ye are my sons, that it is long
Since James and Peter had release by death,
And I am only he, your brother John,
Who saw and heard, and could remember all.
Remember all! It is not much to say.
What if the truth broke on me from above
As once and oft-times? Such might hap again:
Doubtlessly He might stand in presence here,
With head wool-white, eyes flame, and feet like brass,
The sword and the seven stars, as I have seen —
I who now shudder only and surmise
'How did your brother bear that sight and live?'

104. "Theotypas": not an historical person.

112–113. What men commonly call truth, — which is, however, as John sees (hence his smile), the expression of merely transient and superficial relations.

According to tradition John was the last survivor of those who had seen Jesus. His death, then, marks a transition: Christianity must depend henceforth rather on internal, than on external evidence, which lapse of time inevitably weakens. John, too, is marked among the writers of the New Testament as giving expression especially to the more spiritual and mystical side of Christianity. The occasion and the man are therefore dramatically suited for the expression of that aspect of Christianity on which Browning's philosophy and temperament lead him to dwell, and which, he thinks, is apt to be lost sight of, in the attention given to the much less weighty facts of its external history.

John perceives that with him closes a stage in the development of Christianity; for, he goes on to state, Christian life and Christian doctrine are progressive, each stage presenting its own peculiar obstacles to faith, and its own peculiar means of overcoming these obstacles. In each successive stage the obstacles are of a more subtle character, and in overcoming them the soul rises, by successive steps, in spiritual prowess and spiritual insight. John himself had lived through more than one of these phases. The difficulties in the acceptance of Christianity in its earliest stage were met by miracles. Then a new danger threatened, — not an utter rejection, but a false conception of Christian doctrines. This, again, was met by the deeper insight, which John himself and others attained, into the meaning of the teachings and life of Christ.

"If I live yet, it is for good, more love
Through me to men: be nought but ashes here
That keep awhile my semblance, who was John,—
Still, when they scatter, there is left on earth
No one alive who knew (consider this!)

—Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
How will it be when none more saith 'I saw'?

"Such ever was love's way: to rise, it stoops.
Since I, whom Christ's mouth taught, was bidden teach,
I went for many years about the world,
Saying 'It was so: so I heard and saw,'
Speaking as the case asked: and men believed.
Afterward came the message to myself
In Patmos Isle; I was not bidden teach,
But simply listen, take a book and write,
Nor set down other than the given word,
With nothing left to my arbitrament
To choose or change: I wrote, and men believed.
Then, for my time grew brief, no message more,
No call to write again, I found a way,
And, reasoning from my knowledge, merely taught
Men should, for love's sake, in love's strength, believe;
Or I would pen a letter to a friend
And urge the same as friend, nor less nor more:
Friends said I reasoned rightly, and believed.
But at the last, why, I seemed left alive
Like a sea-jelly weak on Patmos strand,
To tell dry sea-beach gazers how I fared
When there was mid-sea, and the mighty things
Left to repeat, 'I saw, I heard, I knew,'
And go all over the old ground again,
With Antichrist already in the world,
And many Antichrists, who answered prompt,
'Am I not Jasper as thyself art John?
Nay, young, whereas through age thou mayest forget:
Wherefore, explain, or how shall we believe?'
I never thought to call down fire on such,
Or, as in wonderful and early days,

Pick up the scorpion, tread the serpent dumb;
But patient stated much of the Lord's life
Forgotten or misdelivered, and let it work:
Since much that at the first, in deed and word,
Lay simply and sufficiently exposed,
Had grown (or else my soul was grown to match,
Fed through such years, familiar with such light,
Guarded and guided still to see and speak)
Of new significance and fresh result:
What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars,
And named them in the Gospel I have writ.
For men said, 'It is getting long ago:
Where is the promise of His coming?' — asked
These young ones in their strength, as loth to wait
Of me who, when their sires were born, was old.
I, for I loved them, answered, joyfully,
Since I was there, and helpful in my age;
And, in the main, I think such men believed.

Now, as his soul is being loosed from earthly limitations, he has a prophetic view of a distant stage, — of difficulties which will arise for a remote generation.

"Finally, thus endeavoring, I fell sick,
Ye brought me here, and I supposed the end,
And went to sleep with one thought that, at least,
Though the whole earth should lie in wickedness,
We had the truth, might leave the rest to God.
Yet now I wake in such decrepitude
As I had slidden down and fallen afar,
Past even the presence of my former self,
Grasping the while for stay at facts which snap,
Till I am found away from my own world,
Feeling for foothold through a blank profound,
Along with unborn people in strange lands,

Who say — I hear said or conceive they say —
'Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!'

The difficulty to which John proceeds to address himself, is the difficulty of Browning's own time and generation, and accordingly this poem is substantially a presentation of Christianity in a manner adapted to the needs of the nineteenth century. In the first place, whereas our century troubles itself so much about the external, historical facts of Christianity, John lays stress on the passage that follows, on its inner, spiritual truth, which is ever a matter of present experience. He, already almost freed from bodily fetters, sees the permanent and spiritual face to face; we only grasp it through the gross form of material fact.

"And how shall I assure them? Can they share
— They, who have flesh, a veil of youth and strength
About each spirit, that needs must bide its time,
Living and learning still as years assist
Which wear the thickness thin, and let man see —
With me who hardly am withheld at all,
But shudderingly, scarce a shred between,
Lie bare to the universal prick of light?
Is it for nothing we grow old and weak,
We whom God loves? When pain ends, gain ends too.
To me, that story — ay, that Life and Death
Of which I wrote 'it was' — to me, it is;
— Is, here and now: I apprehend nought else.
Is not God now i' the world His power first made?
Is not His love at issue still with sin,
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?

Love, wrong, and pain, what see I else around?
Yea, and the Resurrection and Uprise
To the right hand of the throne — what is it beside,
When such truth, breaking bounds, o'erfloods my soul,
And, as I saw the sin and death, even so
See I the need yet transiency of both,
The good and glory consummated thence?
I saw the power; I see the Love, once weak,
Resume the Power: and in this word 'I see,'
Lo, there is recognized the Spirit of both
That moving o'er the spirit of man, unblinds
His eye and bids him look. These are, I see;
But ye, the children, His beloved ones too,
Ye need, — as I should use an optic glass
I wondered at erewhile, somewhere i' the world,
It had been given a crafty smith to make;
A tube, he turned on objects brought too close,
Lying confusedly insubordinate
For the unassisted eye to master once:
Look through his tube, at distance now they lay,
Become succinct, distinct, so small, so clear!
Just thus, ye needs must apprehend what truth
I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
Diminished into clearness, proved a point
And far away: ye would withdraw your sense
From out eternity, strain it upon time,
Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,
Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
As though a star should open out, all sides,
Grow the world on you, as it is my world.

The central fact of the Christian revelation is the manifestation of God as a God of love; and the grasping of this fact is for each individual soul the highest test and highest exercise of its powers. In order that each individual may

be submitted to the test, and receive the benefit of the effort, it is necessary that this truth should not prove itself to mankind once for all, as material truths are proved. Accordingly, the difficulties which attend the acceptance of this truth are continually changing.

"For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear, — believe the aged friend, —
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all.
But see the double way wherein we are led,
How the soul learns diversely from the flesh!
With flesh, that hath so little time to stay,
And yields mere basement for the soul's emprise,
Expect prompt teaching. Helpful was the light,
And warmth was cherishing and food was choice
To every man's flesh, thousand years ago,
As now to yours and mine; the body sprang
At once to the height, and stayed: but the soul, — no!
Since sages who, this noontide, meditate
In Rome or Athens, may descry some point
Of the eternal power, hid yestereve;
And, as thereby the power's whole mass extends,
So much extends the æther floating o'er
The love that tops the might, the Christ in God.
Then, as new lessons shall be learned in these
Till earth's work stop and useless time run out,
So duly, daily, needs provision be
For keeping the soul's prowess possible,
Building new barriers as the old decay,
Saving us from evasion of life's proof,
Putting the question ever, 'Does God love,

And will ye hold that truth against the world?'
Ye know their needs no second proof with good
Gained for our flesh from any earthly source:
We might go freezing, ages,—give us fire,
Thereafter we judge fire at its full worth,
And guard it safe through every chance, ye know!
That fable of Prometheus and his theft,
How mortals gained Jove's fiery flower, grows old
(I have been used to hear the pagans own)
And out of mind; but fire, howe'er its birth,
Here is it, precious to the sophist now
Who laughs the myth of Æschylus to scorn,
As precious to those satyrs of his play,
Who touched it in gay wonder at the thing.
While were it so with the soul,—this gift of truth
Once grasped, were this our soul's gain safe, and sure
To prosper as the body's gain is wont,—
Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth
Crumble; for he both reasons and decides,
Weighs first, then chooses: will he give up fire
For gold or purple once he knows its worth?
Could he give Christ up were His worth as plain?
Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire.

But, we may urge, the difficulties in our day are much greater than those with which John had to contend. Not so, he answers; facts show otherwise; I, indeed, had material evidence for my faith, yet mere physical force was able to vanquish that faith. Gradually, however, by such trials the spiritual strength of believers was developed, and they were able to hold fast to the truth in the face of al' ical violence. Then subtler forms of trial arose

were tempted by false conceptions of the doctrine they had embraced. In overcoming these, Christians attained a deeper and wider insight into divine truth. And so through ages new difficulties will present themselves; and John sees a day coming when it will be questioned whether John himself ever existed, — whether God ever actually did reveal himself in Christ as love.

"Sigh ye, 'It had been easier once than now'?
To give you answer I am left alive;
Look at me who was present from the first!
Ye know what things I saw; then came a test,
My first, befitting me who so had seen:
'Forsake the Christ thou sawest transfigured, Him
Who trod the sea and brought the dead to life?
What should wring this from thee?' — ye laugh and ask.
What wrung it? Even a torchlight and a noise,
The sudden Roman faces, violent hands,
And fear of what the Jews might do! Just that,
And it is written, 'I forsook and fled:'
There was my trial, and it ended thus.
Ay, but my soul had gained its truth, could grow:
Another year or two, — what little child,
What tender woman that had seen no least
Of all my sights, but barely heard them told,
Who did not clasp the cross with a light laugh
Or wrap the burning robe round, thanking
Well, was truth safe forever, then? Not
Already had begun the silent work
Whereby truth, deadened of its absolut
Might need love's eye to pierce the o
Teachers were busy, whispering 'Al
As the aged ones report: but yout
Where age gropes dimly, weak wi
And the full doctrine slumbers t

Thus, what the Roman's lowered spear was found,
A bar to me who touched and handled truth,
Now proved the glozing of some new shrewd tongue,
This Ebion, this Cerinthus or their mates,
Till imminent was the outcry 'Save our Christ!'
Whereon I stated much of the Lord's life
Forgotten or misdelivered, and let it work.
Such work done, as it will be, what comes next?
What do I hear say, or conceive men say,
'Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!'

"Is this indeed a burthen for late days,
And may I help to bear it with you all,
Using my weakness which becomes your strength?
For if a babe were born inside this grot,
Grew to a boy here, heard us praise the sun,
Yet had but yon sole glimmer in light's place,—
One loving him and wishful he should learn,
Would much rejoice himself was blinded first
Month by month here, so made to understand
How eyes, born darkling, apprehend amiss:
I think I could explain to such a child
There was more glow outside than gleams he caught,
Ay, nor need urge 'I saw it, so believe!'
It is a heavy burthen you shall bear
In latter days, new lands, or old grown strange,
Left without me, which must be very soon.

326–28. Line 327 is in apposition to "what." Supply "to be" after "proved." The meaning is — "The difficulty, which in my case had been a material one, — the fear of Roman soldiers, — became, in the case of a later generation, an intellectual one — the false doctrines of heretical teachers."

329. "Ebion": supposed originator of the Ebionite heresy, which existed in the time of John, and consisted in the denial of the divinity of Christ, while accepting his moral precepts. "Cerinthus": flourished 98–117 A.D.; is by some represented as a contemporary of John. He also denied the divinity of Christ.

What is the doubt, my brothers? Quick with it!
I see you stand conversing, each new face,
Either in fields, of yellow summer eves,
On islets yet unnamed amid the sea;
Or pace for shelter 'neath a portico
Out of the crowd in some enormous town
Where now the larks sing in a solitude:
Or muse upon blank heaps of stone and sand
Idly conjectured to be Ephesus:
And no one asks his fellow any more
'Where is the promise of His coming?' but
'Was he revealed in any of His lives,
As Power, as Love, as Influencing Soul?'

The objections are then stated which might be urged by one sceptical on these points. The sceptic of this generation disregards miracles altogether; for, even supposing they actually took place, miracles cannot prove the truth of doctrine. Further, the objector argues, this love which we ascribe to God is merely a fragment of anthropomorphism. Once upon a time, man ascribed all his own attributes to God,—his bodily form, his anger, his pride, etc. Gradually man's conception of God has been stripped of all these. There remain only the attributes of power, will, and love. Of God's power we have ample evidence. Not so of his will and love. Miraculous interference in the order of the world, such as, it is asserted, did occur in former times, would indicate will and love. But, as, at present, there is no less need than formerly of these miraculous interferences, and yet they do not occur, we may safely conclude that they never did occur. So we are reduced to the conception of God as force, or natural law.

354–61. Note the beauty of these lines.

"Quick, for time presses, tell the whole mind out,
And let us ask and answer and be saved!
My book speaks on, because it cannot pass;
One listens quietly, nor scoffs but pleads,
'Here is a tale of things done ages since;
What truth was ever told the second day?
Wonders, that would prove doctrine, go for nought.
Remains the doctrine, love; well, we must love,
And what we love most, power and love in one,
Let us acknowledge on the record here,
Accepting these in Christ: must Christ then be?
Has he been? Did not we ourselves make Him?
Our mind receives but what it holds, no more.
First of the love, then; we acknowledge Christ—
A proof we comprehend His love, a proof
We had such love already in ourselves,
Knew first what else we should not recognize.
'Tis mere projection from man's inmost mind,
And, what he loves, thus falls reflected back,
Becomes accounted somewhat out of him:
He throws it up in air, it drops down earth's,
With shape, name, story added, man's old way.
How prove you Christ came otherwise at least?
Next try the power: He made and rules the world:
Certes there is a world once made, now ruled,
Unless things have been ever as we see.
Our sires declared a charioteer's yoked steeds
Brought the sun up the east and down the west,
Which only of itself now rises, sets,
As if a hand impelled it and a will,—
Thus they long thought, they who had will and hands:
But the new question's whisper is distinct,
Wherefore must all force needs be like ourselves?
We have the hands, the will; what made and drives
The sun is force, is law, is named, not known,

While will and love we do know; marks of these,
Eye-witnesses attest, so books declare —
As that, to punish or reward our race,
The sun at undue times arose or set
Or else stood still: what do not men affirm?
But earth requires as urgently reward
Or punishment to-day as years ago,
And none expects the sun will interpose:
'Therefore it was mere passion and mistake,
Or erring zeal for right, which changed the truth.
Go back, far, farther, to the birth of things;
Ever the will, the intelligence, the love,
Man's! — which he gives, supposing he but finds,
As late he gave head, body, hands and feet,
To help these in what forms he called his gods.
First, Jove's brow, Juno's eyes were swept away,
But Jove's wrath, Juno's pride continued long;
As last, will, power, and love discarded these,
So law in turn discards power, love, and will.
What proveth God is otherwise at least?
All else, projection from the mind of man!'

John proceeds to meet these objections. Man is not a stationary, but a progressive, being. As soon as he has been enabled to rise a stage by means of certain helps, these helps fall away, as no longer necessary. Miracles were needful in order that Christianity should take root. But now that Christianity exists, and that we can see what it is, and what its fruits are, we have evidence sufficient in its favour. To add miracles now would be to force belief, to make lack of faith impossible, and so preclude voluntary effort on the part of man.

"Nay, do not give me wine, for I am strong,
But place my gospel where I put my hands.

"I say that man was made to grow, not stop;
That help, he needed once, and needs no more,
Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn:
For he hath new needs, and new helps to these.
This imports solely, man should mount on each
New height in view; the help whereby he mounts,
The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,
Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.
Man apprehends Him newly at each stage
Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done;
And nothing shall prove twice what once was proved.
You stick a garden-plot with ordered twigs
To show inside lie germs of herbs unborn,
And check the careless step would spoil their birth;
But when herbs wave, the guardian twigs may go,
Since should ye doubt of virtues, question kinds,
It is no longer for old twigs ye look,
Which proved once underneath lay store of seed,
But to the herb's self, by what light ye boast,
For what fruit's signs are. This book's fruit is plain,
Nor miracles need prove it any more.
Doth the fruit show? Then miracles bade 'ware
At first of root and stem, saved both till now
From trampling ox, rough boar and wanton goat.
What? Was man made a wheelwork to wind up,
And be discharged, and straight wound up anew?
No!—grown, his growth lasts; taught, he ne'er forgets:
May learn a thousand things, not twice the same.

"This might be pagan teaching: now hear mine.

"I say, that as the babe, you feed awhile,
Becomes a boy and fit to feed himself,
So, minds at first must be spoon-fed with truth:
When they can eat, babe's nurture is withdrawn.

I fed the babe whether it would or no:
I bid the boy or feed himself or starve.
I cried once, 'That ye may believe in Christ,
Behold this blind man shall receive his sight!'
I cry now, 'Urgest thou, *for I am shrewd*
*And smiled at stories how John's word would cure—*
*Repeat that miracle and take by faith?*'
I say, that miracle was duly wrought
When, save for it, no faith was possible.
Whether a change were wrought i' the shows o' the world,
Whether the change came from our minds which see
Of shows o' the world so much as and no more
Than God wills for His purpose,—(what do I
See now, suppose you, there where you see rock
Round us?)—I know not; such was the effect,
So faith grew, making void more miracles
Because too much: they would compel, not help.
I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.
Wouldst thou unprove this to re-prove the proved?
In life's mere minute, with power to use that proof,
Leave knowledge and revert to how it sprung?
Thou hast it; use it and forthwith, or die!

The last eight lines (474–81) should be especially noted. They contain what Browning presents as the real ground for our acceptance of Christianity.

John goes on to state that when man is in absolute need of help, divine assistance always steps in. By miraculous power God showed man that a will did exist behind the forces of nature, and again in a miraculous way he made manifest in Christ that he was a God of love. But now that this conception of the union of will with force has

been given to man, it no longer needs external testimony, — it approves itself. What need of going back to investigate whether this true conception may not have arisen on false grounds! And when man rejects this conception (as the supposed objector has done), simply because he finds that same union of will and force in himself, he rejects a truth, not from lack, but from excess, of evidence. Again, now that he finds the conception of God manifesting himself as love in Christ, an all-satisfying one for the needs of his own soul, and yet on that very account rejects it, he may be said to die spiritually.

"For I say, this is death, and the sole death,
When a man's loss comes to him from his gain,
Darkness from light, from knowledge ignorance,
And lack of love from love made manifest;
A lamp's death when, replete with oil, it chokes;
A stomach's when, surcharged with food, it starves.
With ignorance was surety of a cure.
When man, appalled at nature, questioned first,
'What if there lurk a might behind this might?'
He needed satisfaction God could give,
And did give, as ye have the written word:
But when he finds might still redouble might,
Yet asks, 'Since all is might, what use of will?'
— Will, the one source of might, — he being man
With a man's will and a man's might, to teach
In little how the two combine in large, —
That man has turned round on himself and stands,
Which in the course of nature is, to die.

"And when man questioned, 'What if there be love
Behind the will and might, as real as they?' —
He needed satisfaction God could give,
And did give, as ye have the written word:

But when, beholding that love everywhere,
He reasons, 'Since such love is everywhere,
And since ourselves can love and would be loved,
We ourselves make the love, and Christ was not,'—
How shall ye help this man who knows himself,
That he must love and would be loved again,
Yet, owning his own love that proveth Christ,
Rejecteth Christ through very need of Him?
The lamp o'erswims with oil, the stomach flags
Loaded with nurture, and that man's soul dies.

The sceptic is now supposed to advance another objection. He says the responsibility for the rejection of this truth, if truth it be, does not lie upon us, but upon the manner in which it was communicated to us. The truth of Christianity has been imparted to us, bound up with external facts which are not true, or at least cannot be proved. In rejecting the one, we are led to reject the other. Why was not unmingled, absolute truth imparted at first?

"If he rejoin, 'But this was all the while
A trick; the fault was, first of all, in thee,
Thy story of the places, names and dates,
Where, when and how the ultimate truth had rise,
—Thy prior truth, at last discovered none,
Whence now the second suffers detriment.
What good of giving knowledge if, because
O' the manner of the gift, its profit fail?
And why refuse what modicum of help
Had stopped the after-doubt, impossible
I' the face of truth—truth absolute, uniform?
Why must I hit of this and miss of that,
Distinguish just as I be weak or strong,
And not ask of thee and have answer prompt,
Was this once, was it not once?—then and now

And evermore, plain truth from man to man.
Is John's procedure just the heathen bard's?
Put question of his famous play again
How for the ephemerals' sake, Jove's fire was filched,
And carried in a cane and brought to earth:
*The fact is in the fable*, cry the wise,
*Mortals obtained the boon, so much is fact,*
*Though fire be spirit and produced on earth.*
As with the Titan's, so now with thy tale:
Why breed in us perplexity, mistake,
Nor tell the whole truth in the proper words?'

John answers that gradual approximation to truth through partial error, is the necessary result of the constitution of man, who is an imperfect and progressive being. If, indeed, one reduces God to mere force, or law, then man, inasmuch as he combines love and will with force, must be a higher nature, — must, indeed, himself be God, and may claim perfection, not progress.

"I answer, Have ye yet to argue out
The very primal thesis, plainest law,
— Man is not God but hath God's end to serve,
A master to obey, a course to take,
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become?
Grant this, then man must pass from old to new,
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
From what once seemed good, to what now proves best.
How could man have progression otherwise?
Before the point was mooted 'What is God?'
No savage man inquired 'What am myself?'
Much less replied, 'First, last, and best of things.'
Man takes that title now if he believes
Might can exist with neither will nor love,
In God's case — what he names now Nature's Law —

While in himself he recognizes love
No less than might and will: and rightly takes.
Since if man prove the sole existent thing
Where these combine, whatever their degree,
However weak the might or will or love,
So they be found there, put in evidence,—
He is as surely higher in the scale
Than any might with neither love nor will,
As life, apparent in the poorest midge,
(When the faint dust-speck flits, ye guess its wing,)
Is marvellous beyond dead Atlas' self—
Given to the nobler midge for resting-place!
Thus, man proves best and highest—God, in fine,
And thus the victory leads but to defeat,
The gain to loss, best rise to the worst fall,
His life becomes impossible, which is death.

But if man admits his own imperfections and the perfection of God, he cannot expect to know at first what he knows later. His knowledge will ever grow. His conceptions of truth will always have something of false mingled with them, but will gradually approximate more and more to absolute truth. To seize the ultimate at once is the prerogative of God alone.

"But if, appealing thence, he cower, avouch
He is mere man, and in humility
Neither may know God nor mistake himself;
I point to the immediate consequence
And say, by such confession straight he falls
Into man's place, a thing nor God nor beast,
Made to know that he can know and not more:

571–633 should be carefully studied, as they contain the substance of Browning's conception of man, his nature and aim.

Lower than God who knows all and can all,
Higher than beasts which know and can so far
As each beast's limit, perfect to an end,
Nor conscious that they know, nor craving more ;
While man knows partly but conceives beside,
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
And in this striving, this converting air
Into a solid he may grasp and use,
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,
Not God's, and not the beasts' : God is, they are,
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.
Such progress could no more attend his soul
Were all its struggles after found at first
And guesses changed to knowledge absolute,
Than motion wait his body, were all else
Than it the solid earth on every side,
Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.
Man, therefore, thus conditioned, must expect
He could not, what he knows now, know at first ;
What he considers that he knows to-day,
Come but to-morrow, he will find misknown ;
Getting increase of knowledge, since he learns
Because he lives, which is to be a man,
Set to instruct himself by his past self :
First, like the brute, obliged by facts to learn,
Next, as man may, obliged by his own mind,
Bent, habit, nature, knowledge turned to law.
God's gift was that man should conceive of truth
And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,
As midway help till he reach fact indeed.
The statuary ere he mould a shape
Boasts a like gift, the shape's idea, and next
The aspiration to produce the same ;
So, taking clay, he calls his shape thereout,
Cries ever 'Now I have the thing I see' :

Yet all the while goes changing what was wrought,
From falsehood like the truth, to truth itself.
How were it had he cried, 'I see no face,
No breast, no feet i' the ineffectual clay'?
Rather commend him that he clapped his hands,
And laughed 'It is my shape and lives again!'
Enjoyed the falsehood, touched it on to truth,
Until yourselves applaud the flesh indeed
In what is still flesh-imitating clay.
Right in you, right in him, such way be man's!
God only makes the live shape at a jet.
Will ye renounce this pact of creatureship?
The pattern on the Mount subsists no more,
Seemed awhile, then returned to nothingness;
But copies, Moses strove to make thereby,
Serve still and are replaced as time requires:
By these, make newest vessels reach the type!
If ye demur, this judgment on your head,
Never to reach the ultimate, angels' law,
Indulging every instinct of the soul
There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing!

"Such is the burthen of the latest time.
I have survived to hear it with my ears,
Answer it with my lips: does this suffice?
For if there be a further woe than such,
Wherein my brothers struggling need a hand,
So long as any pulse is left in mine,
May I be absent even longer yet,
Plucking the blind ones back from the abyss,
Though I should tarry a new hundred years!"

But he was dead: 'twas about noon, the day
Somewhat declining: we five buried him
That eve, and then, dividing, went five ways,
And I, disguised, returned to Ephesus.

By this, the cave's mouth must be filled with sand.
Valens is lost, I know not of his trace;
The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,
And could not write nor speak, but only loved:
So, lest the memory of this go quite,
Seeing that I to-morrow fight the beasts,
I tell the same to Phœbas, whom believe!
For many look again to find that face,
Beloved John's to whom I ministered,
Somewhere in life about the world; they err:
Either mistaking what was darkly spoke
At ending of his book, as he relates,
Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech
Scattered from mouth to mouth, as I suppose.
Believe ye will not see him any more
About the world with his divine regard!
For all was as I say, and now the man
Lies as he lay once, breast to breast with God.

Here the poem really closes, but there is added a postscript written not by Pamphylax, but by some early Christian in his name, and directed against Cerinthus (*vide* note on l. 329). Christ must be accepted as divine, or else his doctrine altogether fails. For it was Christ's aim to draw out the love of man to its full extent, and to satisfy it. That none but a divine being can do.[1] Here again Browning is covertly meeting a tendency of our own age.

1 Compare the words of the Poet at the death of Sordello, p. 278:—

Of a Power above you still
Which, utterly incomprehensible,
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can
Love, tho' unloving all conceived by man—
What need! And of—none the minutest duct
To that out nature, naught that would instruct.
And so let rivalry begin to live—

[Cerinthus read and mused; one added this:

"If Christ, as thou affirmest, be of men
Mere man, the first and best but nothing more,—
Account Him, for reward of what He was,
Now and forever, wretchedest of all.
For see; Himself conceived of life as love,
Conceived of love as what must enter in,
Fill up, make one with His each soul He loved:
Thus much for man's joy, all men's joy for Him.
Well, He is gone, thou sayest, to fit reward.
But by this time are many souls set free,
And very many still retained alive:
Nay, should His coming be delayed awhile,
Say, ten years longer (twelve years, some compute),
See, if, for every finger of thy hands,
There be not found, that day the world shall end,
Hundreds of souls, each holding by Christ's word
That He will grow incorporate with all,
With me as Pamphylax, with him as John,
Groom for each bride! Can a mere man do this?
Yet Christ saith, this He lived and died to do.
Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,
Or lost!"
But 'twas Cerinthus that is lost.]

It will be noted that John throughout makes assumptions, so that his argument is not such as to force conviction on a thorough sceptic. Browning does not believe that the

> But of a Power, its representative,
> Who being for authority the same,
> Communication different, should claim
> A course, the first chose and the last revealed—
> This human clear, as that Divine concealed—
> What utter need!

For the substantial meaning of this somewhat difficult passage, see Analysis of Sordello.

highest truths are susceptible of demonstration in accordance with the laws of logic. He is a transcendentalist, as we have said, and finds the fountain of truth *within* man. The highest certainty arises not from logical demonstration, but from the assent of the spiritual instinct for truth and good, with which man is endowed. This poem merely presents Christianity in such an aspect as will correspond, in Browning's opinion, to the needs of that instinct.

This emphasis on the inner meaning, rather than on the outer facts of Christianity, — on its power as exhibited *now* in the life of the soul, rather than in the past on the life of the body, — is in keeping with all we have seen of Browning's habits of thought. He does not, however, as is indicated in the postscript to *A Death in the Desert*, find satisfactory those rationalistic explanations which do away with the divine in Jesus, and leave him merely a great teacher of moral truth, an exemplar of the highest conduct. Such a theory preserves only the husk, and throws away the grain. Man's need is not for a teacher of moral truth. Man's knowledge of right and truth has always far surpassed his power of putting them in practice. What he requires, then, is not a further revelation of what is right, but some motive which will enable him to live up to what he already knows. This he finds in the love of God manifest in the flesh. God is too inconceivable, too remote, to awaken sufficiently our capacity for love; but as Christ He comes within the range of our conception and sympathy. In Christ we have at once the proof of the infinity of Divine love, and an object fitted to kindle that love and to receive its return. This subject will be found treated by the speaker in *Christmas Eve* [Sections XVI. and XVII.]. The concluding passage is here quoted.

Whom do you count the worst man on earth?
Be sure, he knows, in his conscience more
Of what right is, than arrives at birth [1]
In the best man's acts that we bow before:
This last *knows* better — true, but my fact is,
'Tis one thing to know, and another to practise.
And thence I conclude that the real God-function
Is to furnish a motive and injunction
For practising what we know already.
And such an injunction and such a motive
As the God in Christ do you waive, and "heady,
High-minded," hang your tablet-votive
Outside the fane on a finger-post?
Moralty to the uttermost,
Supreme in Christ as we all confess,
Why need *we* prove would avail no jot
To make Him God, if God He were not?
Does the precept run "Believe in Good,
In Justice, Truth, now understood
For the first time"? — or, "Believe in me,
Who lived and died, yet essentially,
Am Lord of Life"? Whoever can take
The same to his heart and for mere love's sake
Conceive of the love, — that man obtains
A new truth; no conviction gains
Of an old one only, made intense
By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.

Browning is a man who, whether he sympathizes with them or not, is fully conversant with the tendencies of the age. He knows well the doubts and difficulties which surround the acceptance of Christianity. The form in which he presents Christianity, meeting, as it does, many of

[1] "Arrives at birth": is realized.

these, shows this. But that they still exist, and will in one form or another ever exist, he does not deny. In fact, their existence is in perfect harmony with those general conceptions of his, outlined in the last chapter. This life is one of probation and struggle; it is thus that the soul receives the requisite discipline. Christian belief is not a platform which, once attained, the soul may rest sluggish and unprogressive. Life is a mountain steep on whose precipitous incline the soul clambers upward, finding sufficient but precarious foothold now here, now there. The rock which gave it support falls away as the foot leaves it. Every muscle must be strained, every energy exerted; there is no place for rest; but clambering ever heavenward, the soul at length passes from sight through the clouds of death to a higher zone. Christianity affords the motive and strength to climb, — does not smooth the way.

In *Easter Day*, accordingly, is shown how difficulty not only surrounds the first acceptance of Christianity, but attends every stage of the Christian life. No matter, however, what the difficulties, the truth we attain must be held with supreme conviction. Nothing is more repugnant to Browning's temperament than half-hearted belief, or belief which depends on interested motives. Such a spirit is exhibited in that masterly piece of portraiture and sophism, *The Apology of Bishop Blougram*. Blougram is a Christian because he thinks that perhaps on the whole probabilities are in favor of the truth of Christianity, and because faith is more profitable than unbelief in this world, and, at worst, cannot injure one's prospects in the next. The failings of blind enthusiasm Browning easily pardons, but this temperament which follows the dictates of cold prudence, and grasps what it grasps with slack hold, is abhorrent to him. And so, while in *Christmas Eve* is

shown the good inherent in each form of belief,—whether masked by the vulgarity and crass ignorance of the dissenting chapel, or the materialism and formalism of St. Peter's, or the superficial intellectualism of a German university; yet we are warned against the indifferentism and coldness to which such toleration is apt to lead. It is the duty of each man to search out with all earnestness what is truth to him, and, when found, cling to it with all the energy of which his nature is capable.

# CHAPTER IV.

## BROWNING'S THEORY OF ART.

WHEN Homer (did such a person ever exist) wrote the Iliad, he wrote it in accordance with an unformulated and unconscious standard of what was fitting and beautiful, with an instinctive perception of what would please and interest his hearers. We may be sure that he never analyzed this work of his, inquired why he wrote so, and not otherwise. But in the course of ages the world has grown so introspective and artificial that, at the present day, creative work can scarcely be wholly unconscious. At least we may be certain that a man of Browning's analytic and metaphysical bent has not left the workings of his own mind unprobed; that he knows his aims; that he has examined the principles of his work; that he has, in short, a theory of art. This, however, is not a mere matter of inference; the theory and practice of plastic and literary art are subjects not infrequently discussed in his poetry, although, of course, the discussion is usually not direct, but dramatic. Moreover, in a prose essay on Shelley, Browning has unfolded some of his ideas on the functions of the poet. In the present chapter a conspectus of Browning's theory of art is given which is based upon this material. The subject is an especially interesting one, from the light that it throws upon Browning's own poetry and the peculiarities of his style.

In the opinions and principles regarding art enunciated or discernible in Browning's works, one traces everywhere the influence of his favorite ideas, — that spiritual discipline

and consequent growth are the proper object and end of the existing system of things; that imperfection is a necessary and beneficial attribute of our present sphere; that here truth, beauty, goodness, are but relative, — dim and imperfect images that serve to kindle our aspirations and lead them upwards towards the absolute. In short, Browning's theory of art is merely those fundamental principles of his, with which we are already acquainted, applied in a new sphere.

In the first place, in harmony with all his teachings, he judges works of art, not as independent objects, but in relation to spiritual development, — on the one hand as a means and index of progress in the creative soul that has produced them; on the other, as a help to the clearer appreciation of truth and beauty by those who are less highly endowed. Here, in a way analogous to that in which he regards human life, Browning looks through the body of the picture or poem, — its technical execution, to its spirit, — the aim that the artist had in producing it, and the nature of the truth that it embodies. If these be lofty, even though inadequately realized, he holds that the work surpasses even the most perfect embodiments of lower conceptions. "In the hierarchy of creative minds," says his Essay on Shelley, "it is the presence of the highest faculty that gives first rank, in virtue of kind, not degree; no pretension of a lower nature, whatever the completeness of development or variety of effect, impeding the precedency of the rarer endowment, though only in the germ." So, for example, in the development of plastic art, he is by no means disposed to treat with scorn the feeble attempts of the earliest Christian painters, when brought into comparison with the masterpieces of Greek sculpture. Greek art, indeed, may have perfectly attained its end, the por-

trayal of physical beauty; but Christian art attempts something higher, — the portrayal of man, not as body merely, but also as soul; and hence, though in execution so inferior, even the beginnings of Christian art must be held as ranking higher than the work of Phidias. Turning to *Old Pictures in Florence*, we find this thesis maintained.

XI.

"If you knew their work you would deal your dole."
  May I take upon me to instruct you?
When Greek art ran and reached the goal,
  Thus much had the world to boast *in fructu* —
The truth of man, as by God first spoken
  Which the actual generations garble
Was reuttered, — and Soul (which Limbs betoken)
  And Limbs (Soul informs) were made new in marble.

XII.

So, you saw yourself as you wished you were,
  As you might have been, as you cannot be;
Earth here, rebuked by Olympus there:
  And grew content in your poor degree
With your little power, by those statues' godhead,
  And your little scope, by their eyes' full sway
And your little grace, by their grace embodied,
  And your little date, by their forms that stay.

XIII.

You would fain be kinglier, say than I am?
  Even so, you will not sit like Theseus.
You'd fain be a model? The son of Priam
  Has yet the advantage in arms' and knees' use.
You're wroth — can you slay your snake like Apollo.
  You're grieved, — still Niobe's the grander!
You live — there's the Racers' frieze to follow —
  You die — there's the dying Alexander.

XIV.

So, testing your weakness by their strength,
  Your meagre charms by their rounded beauty,
Measured by Art in your breadth and length,
  You learn — to submit is a mortal's duty.
— When I say "you" 'tis the common soul,
  The collective I mean — the race of man
That receives life in parts to live in a whole,
  And grow here according to God's own plan.

XV.

Growth came when, looking your last on them all,
  You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day,
And cried with a start — What if we so small
  Be greater and grander the while than they!
Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?
  In both, of such lower types are we
Precisely because of our wider nature;
  For time, theirs — ours, for eternity.

XVI.

To-day's brief passion limits their range,
  It seethes with the morrow for us and more.
They are perfect — how else? they shall never change.
  We are faulty — why not? we have time in store.
The Artificer's hand is not arrested
  With us — we are rough-hewn, nowise polished:
They stand for our copy, and, once invested
  With all they can teach, we shall see them abolished.

XVII.

'Tis a life-long toil till our lump be leaven —
  The better! What's come to perfection perishes.
Things learned on earth, we shall practise in heaven.
  Works done least rapidly, Art most cherishes.

Thyself shall afford the example, Giotto!
Thy one work not to decrease or diminish,
Done at a stroke, was just (was it not?) "O"[1]
Thy great Campanile is still to finish.

XVIII.

Is it true, we are now, and shall be hereafter,
And what and where depend on life's minute?
Hails heavenly cheer or infernal laughter
Our first step out of the gulf or in it?
And man, this step within his endeavor,
His face, have no more play and action
Than joy which is crystallized forever,
Or grief, an eternal petrifaction!

XIX.

On which I conclude, that the early painters
To cries of "Greek Art and what more wish you?"—
Replied, "Become now self-acquainters,
And paint man, man, — whatever the issue!
Make the hopes shine through the flesh they fray,
New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:
To bring the invisible full into play!
Let visible go to the dogs — what matters?"

XX.

Give these, I exhort you, their guerdon and glory
For daring so much, before they well did it.
The first of the new, in our race's story,
Beats the last of the old, 'tis no idle quiddit.
The worthies began a revolution
Which if on earth we intend to acknowledge
Honor them now! (ends my allocution)
Nor confer our degree when the folks leave college.

[1] This refers to a story told of Giotto by Vasari. He proved his skill to one of the Popes by the perfection with which he drew a circle with one sweep of the hand.

In Browning's conception, the artist is not merely one who, through his skill in reproducing nature, has the power of affording pleasure to his fellow-men. The true artist has a higher endowment and function. He is one in whom the imperfect shows of the world awaken a more adequate reminiscence, as Plato would say, — premonition would perhaps suit Browning better, — of absolute truth and beauty. He is, further, gifted with the power of reproducing, more or less successfully, — whether in marble or colors or music or language, — these anticipations of the divine idea, so as to stimulate the less penetrating vision of ordinary men to a more perfect perception of the absolute. As we have it in *Fifine* (§ xliv.) : —

. . . Art, which I may style the rage
Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things
For truth's sake, whole and sole, nor any good truth brings
The knower, seer, feeler beside, — instinctive art,
Must fumble for the whole, once fixing on a part,
However poor, surpass the fragment, and aspire
To reconstruct thereby the ultimate entire.
Art, working with a will, discards the superflux,
Contributes to defect, toils on, till — *fiat lux* —
There's the restored, the prime, the individual type!

This function of arousing the sluggish mind to the presence of the Divine in the world, belongs even to the least idealistic art. Fra Lippo Lippi, one of the Florentine painters who led the reaction against the idealism of Fra Angelico, is, in the poem named after him, made to defend the naturalism and realism of his art in the following way : —

— The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colors, lights, and shades,

Changes, surprises, — and God made it all!
— For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more, the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to? What's it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course! — you say.
But why not do as well as say, — paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God's works — paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works
Are here already; nature is complete:
Suppose you reproduce her — (which you can't)
There's no advantage! you must beat her, then."
For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted — better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now
Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,
And trust me but you should, though! How much more
If I drew higher things with the same truth!
That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,
It makes me mad to see what men shall do
And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink. (pp. 216–7)

As Browning puts it in his Essay on Shelley, the artist "lifts his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details, and rounding the universal meaning."

The artist therefore attains juster conceptions of ultimate truth and beauty than ordinary men; and the more deep and complex these conceptions are, the more inadequately will his material present them. The works of a great artist will accordingly always bear the marks of imperfection, of the failure of the artist to attain his ideal. But this very imperfection implies the possibility of further progress; it is the space afforded for the soul to struggle higher. Perfection, on the other hand, implies a low ideal, indicates that the artist has come to a standstill, is the mark of stunted spiritual development — "A man's reach should exceed his grasp."

All this is illustrated in one of Browning's most perfect and beautiful poems, *Andrea del Sarto*. This poem was suggested by a portrait of Andrea and his wife, painted by himself, and now hanging in the Pitti Gallery at Florence. Andrea is a painter who ranks high among the contemporaries of Raphael and Michel Angelo, especially by reason of his technical execution, which was so perfect as to win for him the surname of "The Faultless Painter." Early in life he enjoyed the favor of Francis I., at whose court he for a time resided; but, having received a large sum of money from Francis for the purchase of works of art in Italy, he, under the influence of his wife, a beautiful but unprincipled woman, embezzled it, applying it to the erection of a house for himself at Florence. This degradation of his moral nature, this sacrifice of higher for lower aims, seem to Browning intimately connected with a lack of loftiness of ideal which he discerns in Andrea's paintings. This innate defect in Andrea, Browning further represents as increased by the influence of his wife Lucrezia, whom he pictures as not merely unprincipled, but heartless and shallow, quite incapable of appreciating any but the lowest

and most material aspects of life. It is she whom Andrea addresses in the poem; she has been teasing him to paint a picture for one of her friends. The place is his studio in the house built with Francis' gold. Around hang pictures by Andrea, as well as a copy of a work of Raphael, which, exhibiting that loftiness of purpose which Andrea lacks, and that defective execution which, according to Browning, marks all works of the highest art, serves as a contrast to bring out Andrea's defects, and as a text for the greater part of the poem. It is an autumn evening, the darkness is gathering; a sombre melancholy, in keeping with Andrea's mood, hangs over everything. He is conscious of his degradation, oppressed with the sense of failure, yet lacks strength of character to break his bonds. He half excuses his feebleness as submission to God's will. His heart is yearning for sympathy and companionship, and for a stimulus to higher impulses not yet dead within him; but this his wife is equally indisposed and unable to give. She is heartless and indifferent, the restless element in the scene, which she closes by hastening away to keep an appointment with a supposed cousin, really a lover.

## ANDREA DEL SARTO.

(Called "The Faultless Painter.")

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia! bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.
You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?
I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?

Oh, I'll content him, — but to-morrow, Love!
I often am much wearier than you think,
This evening more than usual: and it seems
As if — forgive now — should you let me sit
Here by the window, with your hand in mine,
And look a half hour forth on Fiesole,
Both of one mind, as married people use,
Quietly, quietly the evening through,
I might get up to-morrow to my work
Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.
To-morrow, how you shall be glad for this!
Your soft hand is a woman of itself,
And mine, the man's bared breast she curls inside.
Don't count the time lost, neither; you must serve
For each of the five pictures we require:
It saves a model. So! keep looking so —
My serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds!
— How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet —
My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,
Which everybody looks on and calls his,
And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
While she looks — no one's: very dear, no less.
You smile? why, there's my picture ready made,
There's what we painters call our harmony!
A common grayness silvers everything, —
All in a twilight, you and I alike
— You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That's gone, you know) — but I, at every point;
My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top;

25. "It saves a model": note the sort of motive which Andrea feels his wife can really appreciate.

That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;
The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease,
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape,
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!
This chamber, for example — turn your head —
All that's behind us! You don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak:
And that cartoon, the second from the door
— It is the thing, Love! so such things should be —
Behold Madonna! — I am bold to say.
I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep —
Do easily, too — when I say, perfectly,
I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,
Who listened to the Legate's talk last week;
And just as much they used to say in France.
At any rate 'tis easy, all of it!
No sketches first, no studies, that's long past:
I do what many dream of, all their lives,
— Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive — you don't know how the others strive

59. "Behold Madonna": he points to one of his pictures of the Madonna.

62. Note the coldness of temperament, the lack of enthusiasm which, as we have seen, is, in Browning's view, a cardinal defect of character.

To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat, —
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,
(I know his name, no matter) — so much less !
Well, less is more, Lucrezia : I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.
The sudden blood of these men ! at a word —
Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.
I, painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either. Somebody remarks
Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,
His hue mistaken ; what of that? or else,
Rightly traced and well ordered ; what of that?
Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?
Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-gray,
Placid and perfect with my art : the worse !
I know both what I want and what might gain ;
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
"Had I been two, another and myself,
Our head would have o'erlooked the world !" No doubt.
Yonder's a work now, of that famous youth
The Urbinate who died five years ago.

93. "Morello": a mountain near Florence, visible through the window.
105. "The Urbinate": Raphael, died 1520.

('Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)
Well, I can fancy how he did it all,
Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,
Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,
Above and through his art — for it gives way;
That arm is wrongly put — and there again —
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,
He means right — that, a child may understand.
Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:
But all the play, the insight and the stretch —
Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you.
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think —
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you — oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare —
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
"God and the glory! never care for gain.
The present by the future, what is that?
Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!"
I might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God overrules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;

106. "Vasari": the historian of painting. In his *Lives of the Painters* (trans. in Bohn's Library) a life of Andrea will be found.

121. Notice here and in what follows his consciousness of his wife's defects, and even of her evil influence, and yet the weakness with which he yields to and excuses her.

130. "Agnolo": Michael Angelo.

The rest avail not. Why do I need you?
What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?
In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
Yet the will's somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—
And thus we half-men struggle. At the end,
God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.
'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,
Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,
For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
The best is when they pass and look aside;
But they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.
Well may they speak! That Francis, that first time,
And that long festal year at Fontainebleau!
I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,
In that humane great monarch's golden look,—
One finger in his beard or twisted curl
Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,
One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
I painting proudly with his breath on me,
All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,
Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls
Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,—
And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,
This in the background, waiting on my work,
To crown the issue with a last reward!
A good time, was it not, my kingly days?
And had you not grown restless . . . but I know—
'Tis done and past; 'twas right, my instinct said;

146. "Paris lords": who were, of course, acquainted with his embezzlement of Francis' money.

Too live the life grew, golden and not grey:
And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
How could it end in any other way?
You called me and I came home to your heart.
The triumph was, to have ended there; then, if
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?
Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold,
You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine!
"Rafael did this, Andrea painted that;
The Roman's is the better when you pray,
But still the other's Virgin was his wife—"
Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge
Both pictures in your presence; clearer grows
My better fortune, I resolve to think.
For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,
Said one day Agnolo, his very self,
To Rafael . . . I have known it all these years . . .
(When the young man was flaming out his thoughts
Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see,
Too lifted up in heart because of it)
"Friend, there's a certain sorry little scrub
Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,
Who, were he set to plan and execute
As you are, pricked on by your popes and kings,
Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours!"
To Rafael's!—And indeed the arm is wrong.
I hardly dare . . . yet, only you to see,
Give the chalk here—quick, thus the line should go!
Ay, but the soul! he's Rafael! rub it out!
Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,
(What he? why, who but Michel Agnolo?
Do you forget already words like those?)

199–200. A fine touch to indicate at once Lucrezia's ignorance and indifference.

If really there was such a chance so lost, —
Is, whether you're — not grateful — but more pleased.
Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed!
This hour has been an hour! Another smile?
If you would sit thus by me every night
I should work better, do you comprehend?
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
See, it is settled dusk now; there's a star;
Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.
Come from the window, Love, — come in, at last,
Inside the melancholy little house
We built to be so gay with. God is just.
King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with!
Let us but love each other. Must you go?
That Cousin here again? he waits outside?
Must see you — you, and not with me? Those loans?
More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that?
Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?
While hand and eye and something of a heart
Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth?
I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit
The gray remainder of the evening out,
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
How I could paint, were I but back in France,
One picture, just one more — the Virgin's face,
Not your's this time! I want you at my side
To hear them — that is, Michel Agnolo —

230–1. His wife's face reappears continually in the female personages of his pictures.

Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.
Will you? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.
I take the subjects for his corridor,
Finish the portrait out of hand — there, there,
And throw him in another thing or two
If he demurs; the whole should prove enough
To pay for this same Cousin's freak. Beside,
What's better and what's all I care about,
Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff!
Love, does that please you? Ah, but what does he,
The Cousin! what does he to please you more?

I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.
I regret little, I would change still less.
Since there my past life lies, why alter it?
The very wrong to Francis! — it is true
I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
My father and my mother died of want.
Well, had I riches of my own? You see
How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.
They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died:
And I have labored somewhat in my time
And not been paid profusely. Some good son
Paint my two hundred pictures — let him try!
No doubt, there's something strikes a balance. Yes,
You loved me quite enough, it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance —
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
To cover — the three first without a wife,

263. "Leonard": Leonardo da Vinci.

While I have mine! So — still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia, — as I choose.

Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

Having spoken thus far of art in general, let us now turn to Browning's special department of it, — poetry. On the theory of poetry, many remarks are to be found scattered through his works, but the main sources of information are two, — *Sordello*, which is the biography of a poet, and a prose essay on Shelley, in which we have the advantage of hearing Browning speak, if in somewhat obscure and transcendental language, directly and not dramatically.

The essay on Shelley opens with a classification of poets into objective and subjective. There is nothing novel in this, but the definitions which follow are stamped with Browning's characteristic way of looking at things. The objective poet is, he says, "one whose endeavor has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe or the manifested action of human heart and brain), with an immediate reference in every case to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow-men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction." On the other hand, the subjective poet "is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below, as the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth, — an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees, — the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand, — it is towards these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements

of humanity he has to do; and he digs where he stands, preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of the absolute Mind, according to the intimations of which he desires to perceive and speak." The truth, accordingly, which the subjective poet presents, is truth which he himself has won by his own efforts; it is the result of his investigations into his own nature and the universe about him, — the nearest approximation he has been able to make to the absolute verities. He has something new to communicate; he is a discoverer. Unquestionably in embodying these results in poetry, his first aim should be to represent, with the utmost possible accuracy, the conceptions in his mind. His eye must be fixed on what he has to communicate rather than on his audience; and the subjective conception must not, in any way, be modified in order that it may be more easily grasped by others. The objective poet, on the other hand, is not so much a discoverer as an interpreter. He takes the universe as he finds it, — has recourse to the already accumulated store of truth, and reproduces it for men. He has the "double faculty," Browning observes, "of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply, than is possible to the average mind, at the same time that he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrow comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole." Such a poet must needs be a fully rounded and developed man. He differs from other men both in the completeness of his nature, — no faculty being absent, — and in the high degree in which each faculty is present. He contains all men within himself, is potentially each of them. Such was Shakespeare, the representative objective poet. Such the source of the many-sidedness of his work, both as regards the completeness of its

presentation of objective truth, and as regards the multitude and variety of minds for which that presentation has interest and validity. On the other hand, the subjective poet requires, indeed, a high development of certain faculties, but no such rounded nature. Contrast Shelley, with his intensity, yet narrowness of sympathy and subject, and the smallness of the circle to whom his poetry appeals, with the universal Shakespeare.

Mr. Browning goes on in the Essay on Shelley to describe the succession of great subjective and objective poets:—

"There is a time when the general eye has, so to speak, absorbed its fill of the phenomena around it, whether spiritual or material, and desires rather to learn the exacter significance of what it possesses, than to receive any augmentation of what it possessed. Then is the opportunity for the poet of loftier vision to lift his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details, and rounding the universal meaning. The influence of such an achievement will not soon die out. A tribe of successors (Homerides), working more or less in the same spirit, dwell on his discoveries and reinforce his doctrine; till, at unawares, the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year's harvest. Then is the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe; getting at new substance by breaking up assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassed value, careless of the unknown laws for combining them (it will be the business of yet another poet to suggest those hereafter), prodigal of objects for men's outer and not inner sight, shaping for their uses a new and different creation from the last, which it displaces by the right of life over death,—to endure until, in the

inevitable process, its very sufficiency to itself shall require, at length, an exposition of its affinity to something higher, — when the positive yet conflicting facts shall again precipitate themselves under a harmonizing law, and one more degree will be apparent for a poet to climb in that mighty ladder, of which, however cloud-involved and undefined may glimmer the topmost step, the world dares no longer doubt that its gradations ascend."

That is to say, the work of poetry is progressive. When the labors of objective poets have brought the general mass of mankind to their own level, — when truth, so far as attained, has been digested, — there appears the great subjective poet, who, starting from the same level of truth as his fellows, by his individual efforts rises to a higher sphere, — makes a closer approximation to the absolute. The attaining of this advanced standpoint by mankind is brought about, in turn, by the work of a new epoch, under the guidance of a new generation of objective poets. A statement of similar purport may be found in *Sordello* (*vide* p. 235).

In the Essay, Browning further states :—

"I shall observe, in passing, that it seems not so much from any essential distinction in the faculty of the two poets or in the nature of the objects contemplated by either, as in the more immediate adaptability of these objects to the distinct purpose of each, that the objective poet, in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men (the result of which dealing, in its pure form, when even description, as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with, is what we call dramatic poetry), while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his indi-

vidual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain. . . . Nor is there any reason why these two modes of poetic faculty may not issue hereafter from the same poet in successive perfect works, examples of which, according to what are now considered the exigences of art, we have hitherto possessed in distinct individuals only. A mere running in of the one faculty upon the other, is, of course, the ordinary circumstance. Far more rarely it happens that either is found so decidedly prominent and superior as to be pronounced comparatively pure; while of the perfect shield, with the gold and silver side set up for all comers to challenge, there has yet been no instance."

When a man theorizes about his own art, it cannot be but that his theory will be largely based on his individual experience, and will usually throw considerable light on his practice; as it does in the case before us. Asking now, first of all, to which of these two categories of poets Browning would assign himself, the answer seems to be — to both. He appears to have attempted to fill the gap referred to in the passage just quoted, — to afford "the perfect shield with gold and silver side," to combine the functions of the objective and the subjective poet.

The close kinship of the subjective poet, as defined by Browning, with the philosopher, is evident from the citations. The subjective poet has new truth of an abstract nature to deliver; his poetry attempts to render, not concrete facts, but the underlying verities. Readers of Browning's works cannot doubt that he believes himself to have arrived at truth of this character. The stress he lays on these abstract ideas of his, the earnestness and enthusiasm with which he inculcates them, is evident even when he is most dramatic. "What God sees, — the Ideas of Plato,

seeds of creation lying burningly in the Divine Hand" — it is towards these that Browning struggles, and it is these his poetry unfolds. He is, therefore, according to his own definition, a subjective poet.

Yet the form of Browning's poetry is scarcely ever such as would correspond with matter of this kind. He is not lyrical; he rarely speaks in his own person; he is dramatic, he presents an objective world of men and women. It is true he pictures the internal, rather than the external world; but it is the internal world of others, and therefore, in relation to him, objective. Browning is, therefore, an objective poet, too.

This conscious attempt to combine the two sides of poetry is an essential characteristic of Browning's work, and the source of some of its most striking peculiarities. He attempts at once to give a picturesque representation of the world, and to express and make vivid the abstract ideas by which he considers himself to have risen a stage towards absolute truth. In the majority of his poems, especially of his successful poems, this twofold aspect is easily observable. Take the one just cited, *Andrea del Sarto*. In the first place, it gives a representation of human life, — of two characters, and a situation. The picture is admirable, abundantly satisfactory in itself apart from any secondary object. But the poem contains, besides, an exemplification of the poet's theory of art and, further, of some of his fundamental ideas regarding life, — the imperfection of the present world, the existence of the ideal or absolute, man's fundamental need of struggle through the one towards the other. So in the *Epistle of Karshish*, we have an admirable sketch of character, a study of the effect of an abnormal experience on two persons. Excellent again, and sufficient in itself; but, for Browning, this picture wins

importance and worth, as an exemplification of man's need of a revelation of God as love, and of the necessity of our present limitations in the perception of truth, in order that the soul may exert itself in its present narrow sphere. For other striking examples of this twofold aspect of Browning's poetry, the reader may be referred to *Dis Aliber Visum, A Grammarian's Funeral, Saul, Fra Lippo Lippi, Paracelsus, Sordello* itself. To Browning, small and apparently trifling incidents possess tremendous importance, as unfolding and illustrating general truths. In the words of M. Milsand, "His imagination is attracted and brought into play no less by small things than by great; if it has a preference, it is for great truths manifesting themselves in trifling episodes."

The particular sort of objective fact which Browning treats, gives him an especial opportunity of embodying also the subjective side. For he represents character as exhibited through thought, rather than through action; and under these circumstances, character can best be brought out (as explained in Chapter I.), when the personage defends the principles that actuate him, or discusses some fundamental theory. The poet is thus enabled dramatically to unfold, and indirectly to instil, his favorite doctrines. For illustration, there can be found no better examples than those which have been quoted, — *Cleon, A Death in the Desert, Andrea del Sarto;* or, to cite others, *Bishop Blougram, Rabbi Ben Ezra,* and, among his longer poems, *Paracelsus, Fifine at the Fair.* This method of revealing the white light of his abstract truths through the colored media of dramatic presentations, is connected with his view of the nature of truth, and with a peculiarity of his genius which will be referred to in a later chapter.

To sum up: Browning has taken a difficult task upon his shoulders, — a task which he himself states no one has yet discharged, — that of revealing truth 'in reference to the aggregate human mind,' and 'in reference to the Supreme Intelligence,' to the ultimate, — the task of being at once picturesque and abstract. He has, therefore, attempted a new development in poetic art. He is also, as was shown in the opening chapter, an innovator in another respect. He has attempted to extend the domain of poetry over the whole of mental life; over what has hitherto been regarded as scientific, and not picturesque. This, too, is a conscious innovation with Browning. Sordello, towards the close of Book V. of the poem named after him, traces the development of poetry through the epic to the more complex dramatic stage, and finally to another stage which he himself proposes to inaugurate, — not, indeed, for the world in general, but for the chosen few who can appreciate it. For these he offers to —

—— "unveil the last of mysteries —
Man's inmost life shall have yet freer play:
Once more I cast external things away,
And nature's composite so decompose
That" . . .

(Here Browning himself interrupts his character, and mentions a concrete example of this kind of poetry.)

"Why, he writes *Sordello!*" (p. 238.)

Browning, then, is in an analogous position to those early painters of whom he speaks in the passage which has been quoted from *Old Pictures in Florence;* and that passage contains an implicit defence of his own works. Im-

perfect in expression, in form, in technical execution they may be; but that is inevitable in the case of an artist who takes a step forward. He is, notwithstanding, greater than the perfect workman who has made no advance. Again, we recall his doctrine that all great artistic work is necessarily characterized by imperfection, — the indication of the superiority of the ideal to the realizable, of the man to the artist. Finally, having great truths to utter, Browning "is impelled to embody the thing he perceives not so much in reference to the many below, as the One above him," — in other words, he holds it more important that his thoughts should be rendered accurately in all their complexity, than that they should be put into an easily comprehensible form. It is in this sense that he speaks, in his own person, in the excursus which closes Book III. of *Sordello.* He there compares himself with contemporary poets who have no message to deliver, no water for the thirsty world; while he himself, like Moses, brings forth a living stream of truth in the desert, though his *manner* of striking the rock may be somewhat awkward: —

> While awkwardly enough your Moses smites
> The rock, though he forego the Promised Land
> Thereby, have Satan claim his carcass, and
> Figure as Metaphysic Poet! (p. 164.)

# CHAPTER V.

## DEVELOPMENT: FIRST PERIOD.

THE earlier chapters of this volume have treated of various aspects presented by Browning's work as a whole; the remaining chapters are devoted to reviewing his development, and characterizing the works of the successive periods of his career.

Robert Browning was born May 7th, 1812.[1] His father, an official in the Bank of England, was a man of literary tastes and even, as his son asserts, of poetic endowments. Robert Browning was a precocious child, and wrote verses in his very early years. He possessed also aptitudes for the sister arts of poetry and painting, an intimate acquaintance with which he has often exhibited in later years. When eight years old, he debated with himself, we are informed, whether he should not, while retaining the sceptre of poetry, conquer also the provinces of music and painting. At the age of twelve he had written poems enough to form a volume; but — a fact which will not appear incredible — was unable to find a publisher. Browning's family were dissenters, and he attended neither the public schools nor universities; but, with his father's consent, pursued in private such courses of study as might fit him for his proposed career, — that of a poet.

[1] The biographical details are drawn from an article by E. W. Gosse on "The Early Writings of Robert Browning" in Scribner's Century Magazine. December, 1881.

Pecuniary considerations did not prevent this, as the paternal fortune was sufficient to provide a competence for the family, which consisted, besides the poet, of a daughter only. So that in Browning we have the very unusual phenomenon of a poet who was consciously prepared for his vocation from the beginning. One or two additional facts with regard to Browning's non-literary life may be added here. In 1834 he went to Russia, where he remained for some time. In 1846 he married Elizabeth Barrett, the poetess; and on account of her delicate health, the following years of his life, until her death in 1861, were mainly spent in Italy. With Italy Browning is closely connected; his works are full of Italian scenery, Italian history, and Italian art.

To return to his literary work. The manuscript of his earliest poems was given to Mr. Fox, a Unitarian clergyman, who is voucher for the statement that these poems were so full and melodious that he feared the snare of the young poet would be a too gorgeous scale of language and tenuity of thought, concealed by metrical audacity. These earlier poems were written under the influence of Byron's work; but, about 1825, Browning's conception of poetry was revolutionized by meeting with some productions of Shelley. So little was Shelley known in those days that it was with great difficulty that Browning procured a copy of his works. The copy which he at length acquired, contained bound up with Shelley the works of another poet, as yet unknown to him, — Keats.

In later years, Browning has more than once indicated his admiration for Shelley; and though, at first sight, this sympathy with a poet whose work is so unlike his own, seems somewhat strange, a little reflection reveals a fundamental accord between their respective ways of thinking.

Shelley, too, has a tendency to metaphysics and abstract thinking, is concerned with those ultimate problems which are of such high import to Browning, and inclines to find a similar solution for them in a species of idealism or Platonism. But, perhaps, it is Shelley's temperament which has drawn Browning most of all towards him, — that enthusiasm, that eager, strenuous struggle after the ideal, which is for Browning the highest element of character.

About this time, 1825, Browning conceived the idea of writing a series of monodramatic epics, narratives of the lives of typical souls. Of these, only one, *Pauline*, survives, and it seems to be but a fragment. *Pauline* was printed in 1832, when the author was twenty years old, by means of money furnished by an aunt of the poet. It is naturally an immature work; and, in his later years, Browning would gladly have left it to oblivion. Nowadays, however, a writer of mark cannot hope that any work of his, once printed, will be allowed to be forgotten. Browning, in self-defence, republished it in 1868 among his other works. Notwithstanding its defects, *Pauline* attracted the attention of one or two of the more clear-sighted critics. John Stuart Mill was so far impressed as to be desirous of reviewing it; but was prevented by circumstances from carrying out his intention. In *Pauline*, Browning's style has not yet attained the compression, vigor, and tortuousness of his later work; but subject and manner of treatment are already those which he has since made specially his own. *Pauline* is a psychological study, thrown into the form of a monologue.

The study of character was continued in *Paracelsus*, published in 1835, and in *Sordello*, which appeared in 1840. The characters exhibited in all three poems are of the same general type, — men of magnificent endowments,

men of genius, who attempt to exact too much from life, to realize a multiplicity and depth of experience proportionate, indeed, to the desires of the soul, but out of proportion to the material conditions imposed upon it. In each case, the person is revealed through the struggle he undergoes in the attempt to harmonize himself with his environment.

At the outset of life, man finds himself furnished with desires, aspirations, and capabilities which he would fain realize. On the other hand, he soon learns that he is hampered by conditions, bodily, social, or other, which hinder such realization. Each man must adjust, in his own case, these powers and desires which he feels within himself, to the stern and binding necessities without him. He must determine how, in the face of these conditions, he may give the utmost possible play and to get the utmost possible results from his own individuality. This is a problem which besets us most of all in the early years of manhood, and it is not unnatural that Browning should at this period have thrice returned to it.

Browning is, of course, not to be identified with any one of the three characters depicted in the three poems named; but there is sufficient similarity in the experience of all to point unmistakably to a common origin in the poet's own experience. We have noted that he is wont to give expression to his own opinions through characters unlike, sometimes even abhorrent to, his own. So doubtless here he embodies phases of his own experience in Sordello, Paracelsus, and the lover of Pauline. Browning, indeed, has not failed as these failed; he is superior to them, and checked himself before the tendencies which he depicts, had in his own case culminated in disaster. But he was potentially each of these three persons. So Wer-

ther's experience was in part the experience of Goethe; and the remnant of it was what Goethe felt would have been the outcome of the tendency, had he not checked it.

These three poems can best be understood in the light of biographies of men of genius, like Goethe, — men of surpassing powers and aspirations. Our own experience is apt to be too limited, our own capacities too commonplace to afford the clue to the interpretation of the inner life of Paracelsus or Sordello. The problem which forms the theme of these works becomes exceedingly complex in the case of exceptional natures with many-sided aspirations and multitudinous endowments. When a man has so strong a bent in any one direction (be it, for example, the acquisition of wealth, or of knowledge), that every other aim is insignificant in proportion, the solution of the problem is comparatively easy. But should these two desires be united in equal force in a single individual, the course of life to be adopted becomes much more difficult to determine. Thence we may guess the difficulties of the task in the case of a Goethe, or of a Sordello, men with the most varied capacities, interests, and desires, — with impulses towards art, towards science, towards active life, — with an intense yearning to exhaust all experience, all life.

Now, whatever may be Browning's imperfections as a poet, the careful study of his works affords undoubted evidence of a man of this rich and many-sided nature. He is elevated far above the average man by the multiplicity of his interests and capacities, and also by the magnitude and energy of these endowments severally. Characters of similar scope and energy, he not unnaturally presents in his earlier works; for a poet's earlier works are apt to be more subjective than those of his maturity.

From the complex and exceptional character of the persons depicted arises a considerable part of the obscurity which belongs to these works.

To discuss each of these three poems at length would occupy too much space; and, rather than briefly sketch each, it seems advantageous to give an exhaustive analysis of one of them. *Sordello* is selected because it is the maturest and most difficult of the three; because, moreover, it offers the most complete solution of the problem which lies at the basis of each of the poems; and because, being the biography of a poet, it affords the clearest light for the understanding of Browning himself, and his work.

The obscurity of *Sordello* is proverbial, but before careful study this obscurity gradually vanishes. We are, at least, encouraged to attempt to penetrate it, because Browning's obscurity does not arise from confusion of ideas in his own mind, but from the nature of these ideas, and from his manner of presenting them. Swinburne therefore rightly claims that if we use terms accurately, "obscure" is not the appropriate epithet for Browning's work.

"The difficulty," says Mr. Swinburne in his Essay on Chapman, "found by many in certain of Mr. Browning's works arises from a quality the very reverse of that which produces obscurity properly so called. Obscurity is the natural product of turbid forces and confused ideas; of a feeble and clouded or of a vigorous but unfixed and chaotic intellect. . . . Now if there is any great quality more perceptible than another in Mr. Browning's intellect, it is his decisive and incisive faculty of thought, his sureness and intensity of perception, his rapid and trenchant resolution of aim. To charge him with obscurity is about as accurate as to call Lynceus purblind or complain of the sluggish action of the telegraphic wire. He is something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to

follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realize with what spider-like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of its labour, springs from thread to thread and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination. He never thinks but at full speed; and the rate of his thought is to that of another man's as the speed of a railway to that of a waggon or the speed of a telegraph to that of a railway. It is hopeless to enjoy the charm or apprehend the gist of his writings except with a mind thoroughly alert, an attention awake at all points, a spirit open and ready to be kindled by the contact of the writer's. To do justice to any book which deserves any other sort of justice than that of the fire or the waste-paper basket, it is necessary to read it in a fit frame of mind; and the proper mood in which to study for the first time a book of Mr. Browning's is the freshest, clearest, most active mood of the mind in its brightest and keenest hours of work."

In *Sordello*, besides these general difficulties which arise from the character of Browning's mind, there are special difficulties springing from three different sources. First, the obscurity of the external incidents of the story. The life of the hero is bound up with certain events of Italian history in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Browning seems to assume that we are as familiar with these events, and with the persons concerned in them, as we are with English history, say, in the reign of Charles I. Whereas, in truth, the average English-speaking reader knows nothing more about the historical events involved, than that there was a struggle between two parties, named respectively Guelfs and Ghibellines. Browning, notwithstanding,

assuming in his reader almost as complete a knowledge of the subject as he himself possesses, hurries awkwardly and impatiently through external details, and leaves but a confused and imperfect impression of the relations between the persons, and of the sequence of events. This is a difficulty which any one can, with patience and trouble, overcome; but it is at the outset a most irritating and discouraging stumbling-block. Second, the extreme condensation. Into a poem of above 6000 lines, Browning has put matter that might have filled volumes. In fact, it is doubtful whether in all the books which he has since written, there can be found any of his peculiar ideas of which the germ, at least, is not contained in *Sordello.* In these pages he gives the mental biography of the hero with the greatest minuteness, sketches of other characters, a picture of a period of Italian history, a philosophy of life, of history, of poetry. We cannot expect that our progress should be rapid through pages so full of thought. Third, the nature of the character and experience depicted. This, to which reference has already been made, is the most potent cause of difficulty — the exceptional character of Sordello, and of his mental life.

Now of these three sources of difficulty, the first is a positive blemish, a defect in art. But it is more than doubtful whether the second, the condensation, can be held to be a fault. The initial obstacle once surmounted, condensation is a source of power and attractiveness. In reading some of Browning's later works, one cannot but wish he had in them committed the same error, if error it be. The third source of obscurity is a necessary concomitant of the subject, and no fault at all, provided such unusual and analytic themes are admitted to be fit subjects for art.

The character of the following abstract has been determined by the fact that its main object is to assist the reader in overcoming the difficulties in the way of understanding this poem. It is, in the first place, designed to make clear the inner life of Sordello, which Browning asserts in the preface to be the main subject of his poem. It attempts, therefore, to describe briefly, but clearly, the successive mental phases through which Sordello passed, and how each one was developed out of its predecessors. Accordingly, external events, descriptions, and other passages of a similar nature, are passed over as lightly as is compatible with this object. In the second place, the abstract is designed to assist the reader of the poem in following the text for himself. Difficult passages are therefore rendered with disproportionate fulness. Only an annotated edition of the poem could attempt to give assistance in every case where it is needed; but experience has shown that the main difficulty lies in following the thread of thought. This once grasped, problems of connection and grammatical construction will be found in general to solve themselves.

# CHAPTER VI.

## ANALYSIS OF SORDELLO.

### Book I.

The poet, after stating that his theme is to be the fortunes of Sordello, half apologizes for the narrative form in which he is to present it. He himself would prefer the dramatic form, in which the poet does not appear in person; but, for the sake of clearness, is content on this occasion to take his position as showman. The audience whom he is addressing, he goes on to explain, is an imaginary one, composed of the famous dead, although he does expect a few friendly hearers among the living.

Suddenly the poet summons, from out the past, a scene in Verona, on an autumn evening, six hundred years ago. The city, which belongs to the Guelf faction, is astir with excitement over the news that its ruler, Count Richard of Saint Boniface, has been made captive by Taurello Salinguerra, chief adviser and lieutenant of Eccelino da Romano, surnamed the Monk, who is the most prominent of the Ghibelline leaders. Richard, leagued with Azzo, Lord of Este, had attempted to drive Salinguerra from his town of Ferrara, and, on the eve of succeeding, had been entrapped.

The poet then figuratively gives his view of the character of these two factions. The Ghibellines support the Emperor, who maintains his influence in Italy by a number of feudal barons scattered through the land, who, like a group of rocks in the sea, dominate over their surround-

ings. The tendencies of the Ghibellines are, therefore, aristocratic. The Guelfs, on the other hand, rather represent progressive and democratic tendencies; and the poet compares them to chokeweed, fast covering the sea with one level mantle, and even threatening to overrun and confound the aristocratic rocks. The growth of the Guelfs is the more rapid from the sunlight of the Papacy, which favors this party. Here follows a sketch of the family of Ecelin; then the poet returns to the scene at Verona, and introduces us into a chamber of the palace, where Sordello is sitting, buried in thought, having just had an interview with Palma, daughter of Ecelin. In Sordello [an historical personage, although little is known of him besides the fact that he was a minstrel who lived at this time], Browning sees a forerunner of Dante, in whom his fame and work have been lost.

In this introductory scene the poet, after the old rule, rushes *in medias res;* but the incursion does not attain the purpose on which the rule was based, does not interest us in the characters. We cannot even understand the scene until we get much farther on in the poem. The poet leaves the scene as abruptly as he introduced it and begins at the beginning of his story.

Near Mantua stood the castle of Goito, the residence of Adelaide, wife of Ecelin, and here Sordello spent his childhood. He was a slender boy in whose features one might trace the characteristics of a rich and sensitive nature. He was of the poet-type, and this type falls into two classes. First, there is the receptive and contemplative class. These, overpowered by the beauty of the universe, lose and forget themselves in their admiration; hence love is the predominating characteristic of such spirits. By their sympathetic imagination, they enter into the life and

joy of everything about them; and, having thus exhausted individual embodiments of joy and beauty, rise to the conception of absolute loveliness, *i.e.* to the conception of God. But, for themselves, they forget their own individuality, are content to be merely receptive and contemplative, not active. The second class of poetic natures are active and aggressive. For these, the exterior world merely serves to call into activity and consciousness dormant faculties. The outer world seems to them to exist merely for the sake of their own development. The subjective element which they contribute to their objective experience, they consider to be by far the higher and nobler factor. The world affords simple and imperfect embodiments, important only as furnishing the foundation from which the soul rises to the conception of the absolute; such spirits are the pioneers of the race, who vindicate for men stage after stage in the upward progress; upon these stages, then, in process of time, the rank and file can enter.

Persons of this second class are exposed to two opposite dangers: on the one hand, feeling their superiority to the world of time, they may scorn to exert themselves; and so sink into supineness. On the other hand, they may attempt to force too much out of the present life, attempt to get complete satisfaction for the aspirations of the soul, which can only be satisfied by the infinite, unattainable here. This, it is indicated, is the error into which Sordello falls; and we are to see in the poem how it gradually extended itself over, and ruined his life.

As yet, however, he is but a child engrossed in childish fancies. He imagines in the various objects about him, — plants, trees, etc., — a life like his own. He thus exists in that childish world of fancy which real life, with its cares

and pains, commonly soon shatters; but with Sordello, almost completely shut out from the world and human companionship, this phase of existence lasted longer than usual. With no companions, except these imaginary ones, he naturally grew up without any sense of the claims of others upon him, — wholly selfish and egoistic.[1]

In time, however, the fanciful halo with which he had surrounded these various objects vanished. He felt that he was alone; a poppy was, after all, only a poppy, and could not sympathize with him. He desires now to be no longer merely contemplative, but to *be* something himself, and to have his own qualities recognized by a world outside of him. This dissatisfaction, says Browning, with a life of sympathy and contemplation, indicates that Sordello was not one of those loving souls described as belonging to the first class of poetic natures. Sordello belongs, then, to the second class; and such spirits not only claim to be something themselves, but also feel a need to have this claim acknowledged by their fellow-creatures.[2] Now, as Sordello has no real world of fellow-creatures about him, he has recourse to imagination, and creates a world of men and women, using as the puppets of his fancy all the people whom he knows, or has heard, or read of. Unlike the former creatures of his fancy, — the poppy, etc., — each of these new figures has a character of his own. They are

[1] *Naddo*, mentioned here, subsequently appears in the poem as Sordello's friend and adviser. But here and elsewhere he is employed as the representative of the Philistines, and in his mouth are put the comments of superficial wisdom.

[2] In this passage the word "will" is used in a peculiar, and somewhat undefinable, sense, in which it reappears throughout the poem. It means the power in virtue of which we feel potentially an experience or quality; *i.e.* while one may not actually realize a thing, he feels that he has the spiritual capacity to realize it. Cf. concluding remarks in last chapter.

not, accordingly, so completely under his control as his former creatures. The public opinion, as it were, of this fanciful world, which is based on the real world, values qualities which the boy Sordello would not naturally prize. In identifying himself with the life of his various figures, then, he enters on a life foreign to his own, and accepts not his own, but their estimates of things.

However, he sets about living, in fancy, the life of his characters in turn. Whatever they do, he, by the help of imagination, does. He hears, for example, that Ecelin has marched through the Trentine pass. Sordello imitates him by climbing some steep bank. But his attempted realizations of his characters' actions are not always so successful. He cannot imitate Ecelin's feats with the sword; and the reason, he finds, is that he is yet a boy. He is thus forced, instead of living the life of his heroes *now*, to imagine himself at some future time living it. He thus advances a step towards reality. Instead of the childish freak of fancying that he *is* so and so, he imagines that he *will be* so and so, when he reaches manhood. A second difficulty next confronts him: it is impossible to be all these people when he becomes a man; so he proceeds to select the finest qualities of each, and compress them into one individual, which individual he determines to become. He thus forms an ideal. And the ideal which suits a nature so rich as Sordello's must be a very broad one. He will be no mere fighter like Frederick, and no mere poet like Eglamour; but both combined. In short, the ideal he formed corresponded to that ideal which the Greeks named Apollo.

Henceforward he lives in fancy the life of Apollo, slays Pythons, chooses, as his Daphne, Palma, the daughter of Ecelin and Adelaide, of whom he has caught glimpses in

Goito. But he hears rumors of a rival. Count Richard, it is said, is to be betrothed to Palma. Time goes on; Sordello is on the verge of manhood, and grows sick of a world of mere fancies.

## Book II.

Saddened by the thought of his actual insignificance, in such strong contrast with his dreams, Sordello was wandering, one spring morning, over the marshes towards Mantua, occupied in Apollo fancies, when unexpectedly he was roused from his reveries by coming on a crowd of people. It was a court of Love[1] over which Adelaide and Palma presided. Eglamour, a minstrel who represents the suitor Richard, stepped forward and sang the praises of an imaginary Elys. To Sordello, as he listened, the song seemed a version of the story of Apollo and Daphne, over which he had so long brooded. Smitten by sudden inspiration, Sordello steps forward as Eglamour closes, and sings his own version of the theme. It is received with applause, and Palma bestows the prize on Sordello.

For a week, Sordello is lost in recalling and living over every detail of this scene. He is astonished at the effect of his song. He valued the feeling that gave birth to the song, not the song itself; but his audience seemed to have found an independent beauty and value in the song itself. He concludes, therefore, that he possesses a faculty which they want. "Some perhaps altogether lack the imaginative

[1] A sort of poetic tournament of the Middle Ages, in which minstrels vied in showing their poetic power by singing the praises of some lady. It was customary for the competitors to accept the theme of the poet who began the tournament, and to attempt to improve upon his treatment, as Sordello does in the present case.

faculty; others, like Eglamour, find in their imagination something higher than themselves. It is only through poetry that their dim fancies win distinctness and power."

Meanwhile Eglamour had died. Browning, doubtless, introduces this character and the description of him which we find here, to serve as a contrast to Sordello, and as an illustration of a poet of the first class spoken of earlier. Poetry with Eglamour was not a mere outlet wherein his spirit found a way of exercising itself, but it was the one sole end to which his whole life and power were directed. He regarded his poetry as something higher than himself. He knew (and was satisfied with the fact) that his poetry was his only claim to superiority among his fellow-men. So, when he found his art surpassed by Sordello, the whole aim of his life was shattered. He dies, and Sordello honors him at his tomb.

This first collision with the outside world, and the perception at which he had arrived, of how he differs from mankind in general, in virtue of his imaginative and poetic power, stimulated in Sordello the desire to know something more of his own history. He learns that he is the son of a poor archer, Elcorte, who had perished in saving a child of Ecelin's. Adelaide had accordingly taken the young Sordello under her protection, and caused him to be nurtured in Goito. This discovery of the lowness of his origin and fortunes showed him the impossibility of his ever realizing the Apollo ideal. He accordingly formed a new ideal. This is a peculiar one, and very characteristic of Browning's way of thinking.

Hitherto Sordello had been waiting for the "equipment of strength, grace, wisdom," requisite for his realization of the Apollo ideal. Now he sees that this equipment will never arrive; that the realization of his aspirations is

hampered by physical and social conditions imposed upon him from without. His new ideal adjusts itself to this fact. It is not in any way narrower or less comprehensive than the old; the only difference lies in the way in which he proposes to realize it. He will not actually, but potentially, be Apollo. Ordinary men have simple aims. A man, for example, aims at knowledge; that aim may be attained, but in attaining it the man cramps his other faculties. His knowledge may be great, but he will not be great as a man of action, — a man of the world. Sordello's aim is complex. He desires that every side of his nature should be fully developed. He cannot, then, actually realize any aspiration; for in doing so he would narrow himself, and thus defeat his aim. Here is a dilemma from which he escapes through observing that self-consciousness is the highest thing in the universe. Therein it is, as we saw in *Cleon*, that men surpass the brutes. He will, therefore, realize all his aspirations in his inner consciousness, in his imagination, in his feeling that he is potentially all these things, *i.e.*, in what Browning's peculiar dialect styles "will."

But already in the description of natures such as Sordello's (*vide* p. 80 of the poem), Browning stated that they had an instinctive need that their claims should be recognized by the external world. Sordello, therefore, must gain this recognition from the world; and he proposes to get this through his poetic gifts. In his poems he would present an exhaustive picture of life; he would represent statesman, warrior, thinker, etc.; and men, finding these in his poetry, would perceive and acknowledge that Sordello himself was capable of being all of these.

Sordello now takes up his residence in Mantua, whither his fame as a poet had preceded him. As he did not love

his art for his art's sake, but only for the position it gave him among men, he was content with somewhat slipshod and superficial work. He adopted the traditional troubadour poetry; and, accordingly, his characters were rather personifications of qualities than real men and women. However, he was successful, and Sordello tasted some of the sweets of fame. Opportunities for entering on a life of pleasure presented themselves, and he found it difficult to resist the temptation to seize these actual petty joys, — yet to do so would be fatal to the universality of his aims.

To escape this danger, he devotes himself with more earnestness to poetry, and conceives an advance in poetic art. Instead of the personifications of qualities, which we find in the poetry of that time, he proposes to present real men and women. For this purpose, he finds the literary language inadequate, and invigorates it by the help of the popular idiom. But there is a still more serious difficulty. Having conceived his characters, he finds it impossible to represent these conceptions in their wholeness, by the analytic presentations of language; and his readers in turn are unable to reverse the process, and piece the analytic presentation into the wholeness of the original conception.[1] And so Sordello says to himself: "As far as my own satisfaction goes, conception is sufficient; I need not express my conceptions in language which only mars them. As for the world, it is content with the old style of poetry, and not aware that there is a better. Why, then, should I

[1] Sordello's position here is so closely analogous to that of Browning, that one cannot but see here a picture of the difficulties which Browning has himself encountered in expressing his ideas. In this light the original passage is of much interest.

harass myself to produce a something higher than the world desires or conceives?"

So Sordello contents himself with writing a poem, in the old style, on Montfort, the Crusader. But now his plan of life is confronted by an unexpected disappointment. The public, although they admire his poem, do not consider him a potential Montfort. They praise the hero Montfort, but do not at all consider Sordello such a hero. He is "a mere singer, ugly, stunted, weak." This makes the poet angrily turn on the public itself. The public is so unfit to judge, that he cares not for its praise and blame. To make the praise of these Mantuans of any value to him, he finds he has been bestowing on them imaginary qualities; just as long ago he had endowed trees and poppies with imaginary qualities, in order that they might be fit companions.

Amidst such surroundings and difficulties months and years went by, and the confusion in Sordello's soul grew worse and worse. The natural man in him was eager to seize what actual joys were within reach, but was prevented by the Poet-side of Sordello — the side which aspired to the ideal — which feared the cramping effect of such partial realization on the development of the whole soul. Again the Poet-side constructed, in fancy, splendid and perfect poems, but was prevented executing them by the natural man, which desired immediate reward, and hence, would permit Sordello to write nothing but the conventional poetry of the day, which most readily brought praise and profit.

So Sordello was torn asunder by an inward struggle — whether he should persist in his ideal with the hope of ultimately forcing the world to recognize his universal capacities, or plunge himself heartily into actual life, and into such partial realizations as were within his reach.

Meanwhile, he must, in a certain measure, actually live. He had both to act and to speak. He found the easiest course was to accept provisionally the conventional life of a minstrel. He did just as others did. So, in talking, he uttered every-day commonplaces. For he found it impossible in ordinary conversation to express his own ideas, since every truth appeared to him in all its depth and many-sidedness. Each subject was too complex, too inextricably intertwined with all others, too conditioned, to be disposed of in any short categorical statement. Thus, unable to enter earnestly into the life about him, he continued to take less and less interest in it.

In poetry he fared little better. All that he cared to do was to maintain his position in the popular estimation above his rivals, and this he found no easy task. Their superficial poetry was in harmony with their superficial views of things. But Sordello spoiled surface beauty, by his inevitable tendency to reach to the root of the matter. His friend Naddo, observing the fault, ventured to give advice. "Sordello ought not to introduce ideas peculiar to himself. Poetry ought to be based on the common sense and common ideas of mankind. The poet should not pour forth the fire that burns in his breast; that probably will not please his audience; what they like is calm and repose. If he wishes to please, he must not rise higher than his audience. Moreover, he should be content with a poet's fame, and not, like Sordello, wish to be considered a great man besides."[1] Sordello attempted to follow this advice, and adapt himself to the popular taste; but the conventional point of view which he attempted thus to

[1] It will be noted that this advice of Naddo's contains a great deal of the criticism which has been directed at Browning, and also an implied defence.

present, not being his natural one, he was continually falling out of his role and making blunders.

For this unsatisfactory external life, he tried to find compensation in the inner life of imagination. But this, too, failed him. He could not control his imagination; with whatever character he clothed himself in fancy, it always changed gradually into Apollo.

Here Browning leaves his hero for a moment, in order to tell of some events which were happening in the outside world, and were destined to influence his fate. Adelaide, the strong-minded wife of Ecelin, had died; and Ecelin, no longer under her influence, began to think of the next world, and, remorsefully, of the bloodshed he had helped to cause in this. He attempts to become a peacemaker; marries his two sons to relatives of the Guelf leaders, and purposes wedding his daughter Palma to Richard. His right-hand man, Taurello Salinguerra, who was on the eve of starting for the East, hastens back to Ecelin when the news reaches him, and tries to bring his master into the old course,—but unsuccessfully. Taurello now announces his intention of coming to Mantua. The Mantuans prepare to welcome him, and it is Sordello's duty to write a poem for the occasion. But he feels himself unequal and indisposed to the task. He wanders away from the city, sunk in reflections. "Why should he fret about verses and success? Taurello was praised for hiding his chagrin at his failure to influence Ecelin. That was all that Taurello's success amounted to! Perhaps all apparent success is equally hollow." Unconsciously Sordello had taken the road to Goito, and wakes from his reverie to find himself there. He suddenly feels how hateful and cramping his Mantuan life had been; in Goito he feels the old life of Apollo dreams rushing back upon him.

He reflects over the last phase of his spiritual existence. It had begun in the discovery that his body — *i.e.* the material means at his disposal — was insufficient to realize the needs of his soul. He had therefore substituted for the attempt to realize all the capacities of his nature in actual experience, a demonstration of these capacities through making men conscious of them. This, too, had failed. Was it then the "will" (*i.e.* he himself) that was at fault?

## BOOK III.

A period of reaction now sets in; the life Sordello had lived at Mantua, becomes to him like a dim and distant dream. He abjures the task which he had attempted during that period, — viz. that of revealing himself. He now feels that it is impossible to do so fully, — and that no revelation is better than an incomplete one. He gives up as hopeless the idea of passing through the experiences of all mankind, without doing violence to his own nature. Henceforth, he will be himself. The only activities which he will hereafter attempt to follow, are those so foreign to his nature, as not to tempt him, in realizing them, to forget himself, and to narrow his development.[1]

This state of mind continued through a year of solitary life at Goito. It was, however, a state quite out of harmony with Sordello's fundamental character, and was produced by the exhaustion of reaction and defeat. Even during its continuance, he was half conscious of its temporary and unreal nature; and as the reaction passed off, the longing for activity returned. But alas! as a yearning

[1] Poetic activity, for example, was so closely akin with his nature that, in following it out, Sordello had almost forgotten the higher duty of giving full scope to all his capacities as a man. Poetic activity must therefore be eschewed.

for real life seizes him with unexampled force, with it the terrible consciousness comes that youth — the time for love, for pleasure, for adventure — has gone by. From these he had abstained, fearing to cramp his development. He had considered these activities — loves, joys, etc., — in their completeness, the ultimate end of life; but to no *one* of them ought he to abandon himself until *all* could be realized. He now perceives that they are not the end, but the means; — that his nature and life had been impoverished through lack of this real experience. Ordinary people have limited natures. There are things outside them for which they have no sympathy or comprehension. Their happiness lies in learning to understand and sympathize with these; they thus broaden their own nature. Sordello's sympathy, on the other hand, is all-embracing; he is capable of entering into all forms of activity.[1] His happiness must be found in actually doing so. In other words, whereas he had hitherto eschewed experience in order, first, to be himself, he now finds that in order to be himself, he must first live. He ought, therefore, in Mantua to have embraced every opportunity of activity which presented itself.[2] His task, as a poet, had been to observe and record his observations; but his true task, as a man, should have been to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of things through the light of actual, individual experience.

Youth had gone; as yet however only the noon of life had been reached; he resolves to make the most of the time that remains. It is too late fully to develop himself by

[1] Compare the description of poets of the Second Class, pp. 71–72 of this poem.

[2] Pages 138–39 are very difficult; but careful study, in the light of the above abstract, will, it is hoped, make them clear.

action, yet better partial development, than complete non-entity.

Just as he embraces this resolution, an opportunity presents itself of returning to active life. Palma summons her minstrel to her side. He hastens to meet her in Verona, and receives from her own lips, not official commands, but an unexpected confession. Just as Sordello had abstained from action because of lack of means to carry out his will, so Palma had abstained, because she waited for some "out-soul" — some manly spirit — to control and direct hers. She feared lest, by positive action, she might develop an individuality not in harmony with the expected will which was to rule hers. At the court of Love she had recognized in Sordello the embodiment of this will, and thereafter was busy in planning a career for him and herself. The difficulties in the way of making Sordello her husband, and putting into his hands the power of her family, seemed at first insuperable. But a series of events had opened the way. In the first place, the scheming Adelaide (who, with Taurello, had ruled Ecelin) died, and on her death-bed made important revelations to Palma. Ecelin, having thus lost in his wife the chief spur and support of his activity, abandoned (as already narrated) his old policy, and attempted a reconciliation of the Guelf and Ghibelline factions. Ecelin in a monastery, his two sons wedded to Guelf wives, Taurello saw no hope for the Ghibellines, except in the daughter Palma. He proposed to her that she should come forward, as the head of her house, in the Ghibelline interest. Palma consented; but, for the present, Taurello and she had agreed to keep their intentions secret, and to profess acquiescence in the betrothal of Palma to the Guelf Count Richard, which Ecelin had brought about before his retirement. But now Richard (as related in

the opening of Bk. I.) is in Taurello's hands. It is time for Palma to declare herself. She proposes that she and Sordello should, in the morning, flee to Taurello in Ferrara.

Palma quits Sordello and leaves him sunk in meditation. Here we at length arrive at the scene with which Book I. opens. That scene is the turning-point of Sordello's life. He reviews the results of his life so far. He had discovered just before going to Mantua that material conditions were insufficient to realize the aspirations of the soul. His Mantuan experience had taught him that it was impossible through his poetry to make men recognize the universality of his soul's aspirations and capacities. His year at Goito had shown that he could not remain content with his own consciousness of aspirations, if neither realized by himself nor acknowledged by men. He, therefore, adopts a fourth expedient: he will realize his aspirations by using mankind, not as a means to attest them, as in Mantua, but as an instrument to embody them. The proposals of Palma have rendered this possible.

Here Browning suddenly stops in the midst of his story, and, during the remainder of Book III., talks to the reader of himself and his art. Leaving his poem (as a magician his magic tree) to his imaginary audience (*vide* p. 52, Bk. I.), he gives vent to his own feelings, as he sits in Venice, beside a lagune.

It is only in the works of poets of the First Class, such as Eglamour, that one finds completeness. In works of poets of the Sordello type, there is always some flaw, some divergence from the artistic end, which indicates that the poet is not wholly wrapped up in his work, — that it represents merely an episode in his life. Behind the poem looms the knowledge, and the passion of the poet, tran-

scending anything therein exhibited. The poem gives merely a fragment of that experience which is already past; the poet, ever developing, can never be fully expressed in his poem.

Why, then, asks Browning, should he trouble himself to complete this work of his — *Sordello?* Who is the mistress attractive enough to reclaim him to the active service of humanity? No individual woman such as he sees before him. No; but humanity in general, whom he personifies as a sad, dishevelled ghost. Then he proceeds in figurative language to speak of himself as the poet of humanity. In this capacity he had been at first tempted to present mankind in splendid types, adorned with all endowments of body and spirit. But the evil and suffering in the world had forced themselves upon his attention. And so, the splendid vision of humanity which he had chosen for his mistress in youth, changed to the sad, warped figure now present to his fancy. Such care-worn beauties are indeed to his taste, and, for the service of such, his rough style well fits him. Yes, it is the destiny of humanity to be warped and incomplete. Man is not made for perfection in this life, as Sordello hoped. On the other hand, there is good intermingled with, and at the bottom of, all evil. The worst men have an idea of ultimately arriving at good through evil. It is, perhaps, no great advance to find the necessity for its existence. But it is better to see and admit this, than to profess, as many do, that they have solved the problem and know the remedy, yet, instead of communicating it, bestow some trifling, superficial effusions on mankind. When a poet like Browning attempts something deeper, — awkwardly, as all innovators, smites the rock, and brings forth the waters of true wisdom for perishing humanity, he finds he has sacrificed his own

chances of reward, and obtained nothing in exchange except the title of Metaphysic Poet.

Browning's critics object to his magnifying his office in this way, but receive the answer that it is not he, but they, who magnify the office. He regards all work done in this life as imperfect. Our present existence is merely a period for getting the machine of the soul into working order. In the next life it will be time enough to consider, not the machine, but its products. In this world, poets who are not blind or dumb, discharge one of three functions: the worst tell their own sensations and impressions; the better present things as they really are,—or rather in aspects which are true for men in general and not, as in the previous case, true for the individual merely; the highest class of poets unfold a fuller and deeper significance in things than ordinary men unaided could perceive. An example of this follows. A poet of the highest class is represented as explaining that which an extract from a poet of the most superficial kind reveals to him—something very different from what its author intended. The imaginary auditor admits that the poet has penetrated, through the superficial appearance, to the gist of the matter. Whereupon the poet demands that his auditor should trust his revelations in cases where the auditor cannot follow him.[1]

Browning then addresses the critics who fail to see any utility in such deeper views as those just mentioned. He admits that this power of insight is not everything,—that it would be better if action could be combined with insight. But such perfection in a single individual is reserved for

[1] This seems to be the general sense; but the present writer confesses his inability to follow in detail the speech put in the mouth of this poet of the Third Class.

another world. Meanwhile, it is surely most expedient that these "Makers-see," — the poets who make men see more deeply and widely into things, and so open the windows of heaven, as it were, — should be diligent in their function. Therefore it is that Browning writes this poem of Sordello, in return for which he anticipates from the public, however, rather martyrdom than reward.

He here makes a reference to Walter Savage Landor, who had recognized the worth of his poetry, and to another English friend, and then returns to his poem, which, he says, unfolds the fate of those who attempt to escape the limitations of earthly existence, — to discard the conditions of our common nature, and to satisfy fully the infinite aspirations of the soul. He warns his readers not to be repelled at the outset by the unattractive appearance of his work; as St. John was once terrified at a picture of himself, which, at first glance, he mistook for Satan.

## Book IV.

This book opens with a description of the wretched condition to which Ferrara had been reduced by the siege, and of the accompanying horrors. Next, the garden and palace of Taurello there, built long before for his bride, Retrude of Sicily, are described. Here we find Sordello, who, in accordance with Palma's plan, had escaped hither along with her. What he had seen of men during this journey, has already changed the views which he was entertaining when we left him. He had determined, we saw, to use mankind as his instrument, — as the body, so to speak, which might carry out the aspirations of his soul. Now, a fact with regard to this instrument has forced itself on his attention. Whereas formerly his thoughts

had always been busied with the leaders of mankind, now the existence of the uncared-for and degraded masses impresses him. Individually these are insignificant, but collectively they are the source of the power and importance of their leaders. Such then is the instrument which he must use to embody his will; but an instrument consisting of a low and wretched multitude was unsuited to his purposes, was inadequate to realize his aspirations. He perceived that his first task must be to raise and improve the condition of men, and thus fit them for his purpose. Only then would he find scope for the realization of the rarer qualities of his own soul.[1]

He must set about the preparatory stage of improving the condition of the people; and, no doubt, he thinks, Taurello, who has the reputation of being the people's friend, can help him here. At the same time, the thought strikes him that this very question of how the people's condition may be best improved, must be the basis of this long and bitter strife between Guelfs and Ghibellines. He hastens to question Taurello, but from that interview gets nothing except a feeling of utter discouragement and helplessness. He wanders over Ferrara, and the suffering which he sees, serves to strengthen his new-born sympathy for mankind. He is recognized and asked to sing by a camp-fire.

The poem now turns to Taurello Salinguerra. The Emperor has authorized him to appoint a leader for the Imperial or Ghibelline faction, and Taurello is in doubt as to the fit person. Should he confer this badge of office on

[1] Observe how, through selfish motives, Sordello here makes the first step out of the absolute egotism which had hitherto characterized his existence. He here, for the first time, learns the great truth of the solidarity of mankind, — that no individual, however great, can rise above the conditions that links him with his fellow-men, — that the extent to which a man can realize his own capabilities, is dependent on the condition of the society in which he lives.

Ecelin, or Ecelin's son, or retain it himself? Nay, the fact that Palma had singled out Sordello for her favor even suggested the idea of conferring it on him. Here Browning introduces a description of Taurello, and a review of his past life. Taurello is the typical man of action, untroubled by wide views, and thus serves as a contrast to Sordello. His life falls into a series of periods, each ending in disappointment. In youth he had hoped, by marriage with the Guelf Linguetta, to become supreme in Ferrara. He was, however, cheated out of his bride by Azzo, and forced to flee. He then entered on a new career in Sicily, and won the favor of Heinrich (subsequently emperor), and wedded a wife of Heinrich's blood. But this period of prosperity comes to an end with the loss of wife and child at the burning of Vicenza. In the third period, which follows, having no children to leave his power to, he seemed to have lost personal ambition, and devoted himself to the interests of Ecelin and the Ghibellines. His life meanwhile had been full of adventure; and though he had no ideal of universal development, the many-sidedness of his accomplishments puts Sordello to shame. Nor did he care, as Sordello had done, to display himself. Provided he could attain his practical ends, and use men as his instruments, he was indifferent as to whether or not they recognized his ability. In consequence he was often considered shallow. Now, for the third time, Taurello's life plans were shattered by Ecelin's retirement, and deser-

cause.

in his meditations, contrasts Ecelin as he was,

as he is: lives over again the terrible scene in

nd child, and finally comes

he fit person to receive the

cious that his own natural

abilities mark him out for the position. On the other hand, Ecelin, in virtue of his rank, is the natural head of the party. Why should Taurello involve himself in new troubles by taking the office upon himself? In a few short years he will be forgotten. The trifling songs of the minstrel give a surer hold on fame than his own great deeds. Why should he prove false to the family of Romano for the bauble of power?

Then, practical man that he is, Taurello turns from these wider questions with which he had been amusing himself, to the pressing and practical one of what he is to do with his prisoner, Richard. In this narrowness of view and aim lies his advantage over the visionary Sordello.

Meanwhile, Sordello was questioning Palma as to the cause for which Guelf contended against Ghibelline, and found that neither party aimed at the people's good. The motives which actuate the leaders are utterly selfish and ignoble. Whereupon Sordello's good opinion of himself returns. He, indeed, has done nothing; but Taurello and the rest, worse than nothing. To Sordello alone has occurred the idea of serving the people. The question now is — How?

A chance incident suggests the answer. A soldier comes to ask Sordello for a ballad on the subject of Crescentius Momentanus. Crescentius had, in the year 998 A.D., conceived the idea of restoring Rome to its independence, setting it free from the rule of strangers like the emperors, and had died in the cause. This story suggested to Sordello the answer to his question. The true way to serve the people was to restore Rome (which typified the progress of mankind, — the predominance of law and order) to her old rights.

## Book V.

The sights and reflections of one day were sufficient to dissipate this splendid dream of restoring Rome. Sordello perceives that the masses are not yet ready for such a step; that in human progress there can be no leaps and bounds; short steps in long intervals of time are its necessary condition. One generation devised, for example, a cave for shelter; it has passed away before the next step in architecture can be made, and a hut built. So generation after generation vanishes, and at length a city is conceived and built. By and by, comes sewer and forum; at length, in the lapse of ages, the statue. It may be objected that it would be better if some great artificer should make all these steps in one lifetime. But no, that would be vain; men would not appreciate the advance. It is useless to bestow benefits on mankind of which they do not feel the lack.

Such reflections had almost led Sordello to abandon his beautiful scheme, when he bethinks him that the true object of this vision of the completed plan, is to inspire man with hope and enthusiasm, and that there is another vision, viz. of the first step which must be made towards that ideal. One who realized the complete vision would be a god; it is man's duty to make the step. Sordello now attains the perception of the truth — "that collective man outstrips the individual" — that each man's work is to a large degree the outcome of the work of his predecessors. This is true, for example, in the domain of poetry. Or again, consider the development of society, the advance of law and order. Charlemagne established order through mere force, — the feudal system. Unnoted almost, and confounded with this civil system, lay the

germ of the Church. By organizing the multitude, Charlemagne had transformed an aggregate of individuals into a unity—into a body, as it were, which, however, was held together by pure force. To this body (as the next stage in advancement), the Church, having attained consciousness of independent existence, began to lay claim, and as the *soul* of society, to assert its superiority to civil power. Pope Hildebrand was the man chiefly instrumental in making this claim good; but an innumerable series of workmen, each contributing his small quota, had developed the work represented by Charlemagne and Hildebrand respectively. Order, which strength had guaranteed, begot knowledge, or the power of moral ideas. Progress did not stop here. Moral ideas began to make use of strength, as in the crusades; while now, in the institution of the "Truce of God," strength (*i.e.* physical force) was beginning to be dispensed with altogether. Sordello's scheme really aimed at dispensing with force completely,—the production of moral and intellectual results, by moral and intellectual forces. But this was as yet premature; the world was not ready for it. Part of the work which Hildebrand had begun was not yet completed. Either, then, Sordello must be content with the humbler task of perfecting the work of his great predecessor, or else betake himself to his old life of fancy. But having discovered the closeness of the tie that bound him to the rest of mankind, and having had his sympathy once aroused for real men and women, Sordello could never again rest satisfied with the old inactive Goito life. Perhaps, too, he thinks, he may be the one man qualified to bring about that step in advance which the age is fitted to take. He further plainly perceives that the one practical contribution to human welfare which is, at the

moment, in his power, is ("since talking is his trade") to persuade Taurello to embrace the Guelf cause, which seems to Sordello to be more closely akin with that of Rome, the Church, and the supremacy of moral and intellectual forces, than is the Ghibelline.

Resolved not to lose this opportunity, as he has lost others, he immediately hastens to Taurello, whom he finds conversing with Palma. With the hopefulness of the novice, he expects to bring about by a single speech a result which might well be the task of half a lifetime. But Sordello has not yet got rid of old defects. His self-consciousness and inability to forget himself in his cause deprives his words of warmth and vigor. Taurello, indeed, listens with politeness, but the remark he lets fall at the close of the speech indicates indifference, or even contempt for the orator and his ideas. Thereupon the terrible feeling comes over Sordello that, in his past trifling with life, he has frittered away both his opportunities and his capacity for earnest work. He fears that there now remains for him only the work and fame of a mere poet. Such a fate seems terrible, and he makes one more effort to do his work in behalf of his fellow-men. But Taurello, still unmoved, only makes a sarcastic reference to the unfitness of poets for the great sphere of politics. Scorn to a poet, as a poet, from such a man as Taurello kindles all Sordello's indignation. He forgets himself entirely, and, in his earnestness, is able to do what he could not do at Mantua, — unfold his own peculiar ideas. They were not like Naddo's, thoughts retailed exactly in the same form in which they had been received from others, but an original product concocted from all the knowledge Sordello had been storing. He was kindled, too, by a sense of the presence of the unhappy multitude in whose behalf he pleaded.

He begins by acknowledging his individual failure, his personal inferiority to Taurello, but proudly asserts the superiority of his aims and ideals, and the primacy of the poet as such. The poet, he proceeds, is "earth's essential king." He himself, indeed, had missed the truly royal attribute, through wasting his powers on the preparatory stage of realizing the various forms of life and character that have existed in the world. The second and distinctive function of the poet is to proceed a step further, and add something novel to the world's stock out of his own individuality. Having attained this higher stage, it is his next business to bring the rest of mankind to his own level. This reached, a new leader will arise who will repeat the process and advance humanity another step.

Sordello claims to be one of these leaders, not feeling himself thereby cut off from mankind, but finding therein a tie which binds him closely to his fellows. By this conception he escapes his loneliness and egoism; the world is no longer a place merely for working out his own individuality. No, he is the heir of the labors of a long line of workers, and must himself, in turn, contribute his share to the development of mankind. As he looks back on the history of the world, he traces through all apparent confusion this orderly advance, to which it is now his task to contribute. He passes over the earlier stages of social growth through deeds, or physical force,[1] and begins where song first came into existence, — "the product of the finest minds," which are "finest" not because they differ from others in kind, but because they surpass them in degree. Development consists in the gradual disengagement of thought from the physical or corporeal. It

[1] This has already been given for the reader in pp. 219 ff. of Book V.

is an advance when, instead of act producing act, mere thought (*i.e.* moral force) produces act. Song, then, which dispenses altogether with act or corporeal force, is already an advanced stage of progress. The highest conceivable stage is when thought itself is dispensed with, and we come into immediate contact with mind; *i.e.* we perceive, without intervening medium, the will of God. This last step is unattainable; the rest we may hope for.

Sordello proceeds to trace the development of the work of the poet. First, poetry unfolded the elements of life — men and women in their simplest and most predominant characteristics, hence clearly marked as good or bad. The poet accepts his characters from tradition or history, and merely stands by and exhibits them. This is the epic stage, and Sordello here gives a prophetic description of the work of Dante. The next stage is the dramatic. The poet stands above his characters, and tests and exhibits them by bringing them into collision with circumstances. He thus exhibits the shadings and minutiæ of character, and substitutes a complete portrait for the simple and strong outlines of the epic period. Finally, not for the world in general, but for the few who can appreciate it, there is a still more developed form of poetry, — that which, neglecting external things, unveils man's inmost life. In short, Browning himself interpolates the kind of poetry of which *Sordello* is an example.

Sordello then speaks of the *pari passu* advance of the audience with the poet. In the later period they must meet the poet half way; he is able to assume the accumulated results of the past, so that a hint, a word, is sufficient where formerly explicit details were necessary. And yet expression will always be found inadequate to thought.

The latest poets, with all the accumulated spoils of the past, will not be able to express a tithe of their thoughts.[1]

Finally, Sordello returns to the immediate task before him, and again appeals to Taurello to embrace the people's cause. On a man like Taurello, such ideas and arguments as these had, of course, no effect whatever. Not so, Sordello's manner. Taurello sees that such enthusiasm, eloquence, and energy would prove very serviceable. He despairs of Ecelin; Palma, who might have proved a worthy head of her family and the Ghibelline party, is disqualified by sex. She, however, loves Sordello; so with a sudden impulse, — half jest, half earnest, — Taurello throws the Emperor's badge about Sordello's neck. Whereupon Palma sees that it is time to reveal something which Adelaide had confessed on her death-bed. Sordello is the son of Taurello, who was supposed to have perished as an infant in the flames of Vicenza. Adelaide alone had been cognizant of this fact, and she, perceiving Taurello's superiority over her own husband Ecelin, and fearing that he might ultimately seize, for the benefit of his son, power and honor which she destined for her own, had kept the fact concealed even from Ecelin.

A son restored to him, all Taurello's long-vanished ambition returns, and he sets forth plans for the aggrandizement of his family. But Sordello remains silent, and Palma, perceiving that he needs to be left to his own thoughts, hurries Taurello away. He continues to pour forth his projects into Palma's ear, until a noise is heard in the chamber where they had left Sordello, and they hasten thither.

[1] The passage on p. 239 seems to give expression to Browning's own method and experience.

## Book VI.

Left alone, Sordello had been lost in anticipations of the future which seemed open before him, until the noise of the city recalled him to the multitude and their claims. He began an inward debate as to his future course, by a review of the past in the light of present knowledge and experience. The successive impulses to which he had yielded seemed good severally, and bad only in so far as each had checked the development of the others. His life was defective, inasmuch as it lacked that unity which is afforded by the predominance of some one aim, sufficient to draw out the whole force of the individual. It was to the possession of such a fixed and definite aim that others, inferior to him in natural endowments, owed their success in attaining some substantial fruit from life. In the absence of such an aim, the spirit remains inert, so that real life does not begin in the present phase of existence at all.

Here a difficulty presents itself; the aim must be proportioned to the soul. For the limited spirits of ordinary men, some of the various manifestations of good afforded a sufficient object to call out every energy; for a universal spirit like Sordello, there should be a Best — some absolute good — proportioned to his desires. And yet, he thinks, perhaps, none such exists. In that case, a spirit of the Sordello type must find its end in itself, — in its own development. May not this be true also of inferior natures, save that not being fit for the reception of perfect truth, they must be enticed to work out their own development by these embodied lures, which serve n for aims?

the multitude being inextricably connected with their advantage, he is merely devel-

oping a neglected part of himself; and it might well be a question, whether he ought, in benefiting the multitude, (which was merely one part of him) to sacrifice the rest, his own personal future. But, again, the imagined entreaty of the masses forces itself upon his mind,—that he should first devote his energies to the commonplace work which would benefit them, and leave his more splendid exploits until this had been accomplished.

And yet, supposing he did so devote himself, how little would he be able to effect. Having attained one new truth, he must spend his remaining energies in enabling mankind to attain it too, instead of following it out through higher and higher stages.

He had, for example, attained to a spark of insight, viz. that the Guelfs should fitliest rule. Must he, to persuade men of this, sacrifice all the splendid prospects which the Emperor's badge and the revelation of Palma opened for him? Was such a sacrifice warranted, especially considering that the difference between Guelfs and Ghibellines was so small? And, then, at best, what a hopeless task he would undertake; for evil is not merely present in one spot whence it might possibly be removed, but inextricably interwoven with the constitution of things. It is involved in good, and has its outcome in good. Joy is but the result of evil overcome; evil affords the obstructions on which man's spirit is developed. Perfection would weary; it is because the whole can be attained only in parts, that it is infinite; as a whole, we should soon exhaust it. We are soon sated with what we have attained; it is what lies beyond that allures.

Let Sordello then gratify the cravings of his nature for life in all its fulness; while draining ignoble sources, and seemingly neglecting higher attributes, he will really be

working out the complete development of his own nature. The little which the multitude individually contribute to his enjoyment, can make no perceptible difference to the lot of each; as on the other hand, any sacrifice which Sordello might make, would be quite inadequate to better, in any measurable degree, their condition. Let each soul, then, hasten on its way towards the goal of joy: why should a precocious spirit delay, that it may not outstrip the mass?

Thus, as Sordello reflected, the possibilities of joy which lay in his own power assumed more and more gigantic proportions; while the world seemed to him less and less capable of profiting even by the completest sacrifice on his part. Why should he, before plunging himself into the fulness of existence, wait for some future life? It is, indeed, probable that some more splendid phase of existence awaits him when this is closed. But this world's joys are for this world; for them he thirsts, and the impalpable delights of a future existence are scarce likely to console him for having missed those which belong to the present.

Yet these joys have often been abjured by sages, champions, and martyrs, in pursuit of higher ones beyond. But they felt truths, and cherished convictions which are not Sordello's. Each individual must act according to his own perceptions. Objects appear differently when viewed on different sides, and no one has attained absolute truth or absolute right. The right and good which we do attain are dependent on the passing conditions of the phase of existence in which we are.

At this point Sordello receives a marvellous power of spiritual vision. He was on the point of death, and the dissolving of the bodily receptacle seemed to allow the soul to pierce through secondary veils into the truth of

things. He saw that what is called beauty or ugliness, good or evil, is so only in relation to the conditions of our present life. In a new sphere, good and ill will be something different. There will be new joys and sorrows with the same end, however, — that of developing the soul. He now perceived the cause of the failure of his life. The soul is eternal, and is adapted for infinite development through all phases of existence. It is in each sphere submitted to certain conditions, — in the present, for example, to what we call bodily or material. The soul must, therefore, not seek such scope for itself as would satisfy its infinite cravings, but such as are commensurate with the body and the material world. But Sordello had attempted to satisfy these infinite cravings, and in the vain attempt, had neglected the only results, which, according to present conditions, are attainable. He had thus attained nothing.

Is this, then, to be the result in successive spheres of existence? Is Sordello to miss the satisfaction which properly belongs to each sphere, and only to see his error when leaving it — when the soul is freer, having escaped one cycle of conditions, and being not yet entered upon another? No; that cannot be. There must be some way of bringing the soul into harmony with its conditions. Ordinary men accomplish this by degrading the soul, and neglecting its aspirations. They blind the spirit to the multitudinous ends of existence, and, fastening on some aim as the sole one, pursue it with all their energy. But is it not possible, while preserving the many-sidedness of the soul, to find some motive, some love, powerful enough to make the soul submit to material conditions, and be content to follow out some course of activity such as the present life affords? Here in Sordello's own case, Nature, in order to afford a motive sufficient, has employed all her allurements from

the trees and flowers of his childhood, to the multitude, with regard to whom this internal debate began. Whether shall he sacrifice himself or the multitude?

Of Sordello's thoughts we learn nothing more: he dies at this point; but the fact, told on the next page, that the badge was found trodden beneath his feet, indicates that he chose what we feel to be the better part, — that he resolved to sacrifice his own ambition to the well-being of mankind.

The difficulties raised in the final debate have not, however, been answered; accordingly Browning, in person, steps in to give his solution. There is need, we have seen, of a Love powerful enough to bind down the soul to a course of action commensurate with the conditions of the present universe. This love must be for an object completely external to, and beyond, ourselves; otherwise, we fall into the dilemma, which confronted Sordello, of sacrificing a part to a part. This object must, further, be capable of drawing out the soul completely and infinitely; that is, — must be beyond and above us, never to be attained or understood; must, in short, be absolute and infinite, in other words — God. But the mere conception of God is too remote and incomprehensible; there must be some means of communication between the Absolute and man, equal in authority with the Absolute, yet capable of being brought into relation with man. There is need, then, of God revealed to man, *i.e.* Christ.

Salinguerra and Palma found Sordello dead, with the badge beneath his feet. He has passed through the various stages of development; and has learned at last that Love is necessary: — this is a central truth at which spirits as different as Eglamour and Sordello meet.

The interest of the story has gone with Sordello, but the

poet hastily winds up its remaining threads. Taurello abandons the projects for the aggrandizement of himself and his family, which the events of that evening had begotten, and identifies himself again with the house of Romano. The two sons of Ecelin came forward as leaders of their party, and prove scourges of humanity, while Taurello sinks into insignificance, and spends his last days, an octogenarian, in nominal imprisonment in Venice.

The poet then takes leave of the other characters. Eglamour's spirit rises higher and higher through successive phases of existence, but always among the lowest who rise. There ever clings to him something of incompleteness and imperfection. As for Sordello, the chroniclers celebrate him as knight, bard, and gallant. Just what he desired to become, yet could not be, they make him. About these matters, then, he need not have troubled himself; mankind gave him the attestation which he so much desired (*vide* Bk. II.). The incompleteness in his life lies on that side where completeness was in his power; viz. in active life for the service of mankind. He suffered an opportunity to slip which has never presented itself to any individual since. The chance had vanished before Dante came. So the world has suffered and continues to suffer from Sordello's remissness. The best we can say for him is, that he was a poet who struggled upward towards God, singing as he went, though his song has not availed to his fellow-men.

Browning closes with a word to his readers. His poem doubtless lacks the sweetness which pleases the public. But the harshness of its perfume, to which the critics object, is a mark of the power and permanence of the work.[1]

[1] Cf. Epilogue to *Pacchiarotto, and Other Poems.*

# CHAPTER VII.

## DEVELOPMENT: SECOND PERIOD.

ALREADY before the publication of *Sordello*, Browning had turned to work of a new kind. In 1835 he had met the famous actor Macready, and at his suggestion wrote a regular drama for the stage, the historical play entitled *Strafford*. It was produced at Covent Garden Theatre in 1837, and was the first of a series of dramatic works which ended in 1846 with *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy*. In the opening chapter of this volume, we have discussed at length Browning's excellences and limitations as a dramatic writer, and this series of works simply gives occasion for illustrating and reiterating what was there said. They may, therefore, be dismissed with a brief review.

In *Paracelsus*, Browning had employed a form which is dramatic in so far as description in the third person is eschewed, and the poem unfolded in a series of dialogues,—or rather monologues; for, though there is more than one speaker, there is no real conversation, but a succession of speeches, as truly monologues as *Andrea del Sarto* or *Bishop Blougram*. The poet, aware of this,—aware that notwithstanding its form, the poem is not dramatic in the ordinary sense,—attempts to preclude misconception by prefixing the following remarks:—

"I am anxious that the reader should not, at the very outset,—mistaking my performance for one of a class with which it has nothing in common,—judge it by principles on which it has never

been moulded, and subject it to a standard to which it was never meant to conform. I therefore anticipate his discovery, that it is *an attempt*, probably more novel than happy, *to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose aim is to set forth any phenomenon of the mind or the passions, by the operation of persons and events; and that, instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded:* and this for a reason. I have endeavored to write a poem, not a drama: the canons of the drama are well known, and I cannot but think that, inasmuch as they have immediate regard to stage representation, the peculiar advantages they hold out are really such only so long as the purpose for which they were at first instituted is kept in view. I do not very well understand what is called a Dramatic Poem, wherein all those restrictions only submitted to on account of compensating good in the original scheme are scrupulously retained, as though for some special fitness in themselves, — and all new facilities placed at an author's disposal by the vehicle he selects, as pertinaciously rejected."

The passage italicized in the above (the italics are not in the original) exactly describes Browning's own special sphere; whereas in submitting himself to the restrictions of the true drama, he lost the advantages of his own method, without being able, for reasons explained in Chapter I., to avail himself of the advantages of the regular dramatic form. His dramas, accordingly, are neither great as dramas, nor do they rank high among Browning's own works; for in them he was hampered by uncongenial aims and methods. He himself virtually condemns *Strafford* as a play, when he says, in the preface, that this play "is one of Action in Character, rather than Character in

Action," a peculiarity which, according to his preface to *Paracelsus*, belongs rather to a dramatic poem than a regular drama. "On the stage," says M. Louis Etienne, in an article on Browning,[1] "we require action and not psychological analysis; movement is necessary, whereas psychology can only be unfolded by means of long speeches." The same critic recognizes Browning's power of creating characters, and his inability to use them in a drama. "Browning," he says, "can create persons who live and speak; but these confine themselves to feeling and thinking; they do not act." Both of these central defects in Browning as a writer for the stage, arise from his preoccupation with the inner life. The struggle of the mind for inner unity, as in *Sordello*, is the theme that suits him best. Whereas in Shakespeare, while inner unity may be involved, it is always bound up with the overcoming of some exterior obstacle, as in the case of Hamlet, Brutus, Othello; and this external action is kept in the foreground. When Browning combines an external with an internal crisis, the combination is often forced and awkward, as in the death of Sordello, of Luria, etc. In external matters he falls easily into the fault of the artist who has not complete command over his material, — into exaggeration, and the action becomes melodramatic. Witness the unnatural and repugnant play of *The Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, characteristically admired by Dickens, whose own works are marred by the same defect of overdrawn and unnatural pathos. The more common defect is, as already indicated, absence of action and movement. In *Luria*, where the situation is really dramatic, — a Moorish mercenary leading the armies of Florence to victory, while the Florentines themselves are plotting his destruction, —

[1] Revue des Deux Mondes, Sec. Periode, tome 85.

"there is," as Mr. W. L. Courtenay says, "no movement, no scenic interest, no picture for the eye."[1] The interest has been transferred from the outer drama to the drama that is being enacted in Luria's own soul. In most of the plays the motives and characterization are too subtle for the form; *Strafford* or *King Victor and King Charles* may be read more than once with very dim impressions of the persons and their relations to one another. *Colombe's Birthday* is, perhaps, one of the most attractive of these plays, but the external action lacks all seriousness and interest,—a Duchess, with one follower, debating whether she will maintain herself in her capital against an invading Prince, attended by an aged philosopher.

The defects of Browning's work in this province are manifest not merely in general structure, but in detail. Browning's special power and excellence are best revealed in long monologues, but these are dead-weights on a drama. The length and number of monologues in the most psychological of Shakespeare's plays sink into insignificance when compared with those of the plays under consideration. The following illustrative statistics are drawn from the article quoted above. Luria reveals himself in a speech of 80 lines (Act IV.) before drinking poison; King Victor, when he returns to the palace, explains himself in a speech of 82 lines; Constance expounds to Norbert (*In a Balcony*), the mental condition of the Queen in an analysis contained in one speech of 53, and another of 61 lines; Djabal, in one of his most critical meetings with Anael (*Return of the Druses*), furnishes a commentary of 54 lines on his own motives, conveyed in two asides to the audience. On the other hand, where can we find a real and living

[1] Fortnightly Review, June, 1883.

dialogue in which there is interaction and movement, such as the quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Cæsar*, — a perfect drama in itself, with its exposition of the facts, their development, the crisis, and the dénouement. Compare with such a scene the awkwardness and unnaturalness of the interview between Jules and Phene in *Pippa Passes*. This interview also gives an example of the next defect in these dramas, — Browning's inability to make his characters talk naturally, — a defect examined in Chapter I. How out of keeping with her position and character is it that Phene should talk and behave as she does in this scene! And, in the same work, Pippa's soliloquy and many of her songs are equally unsuited to her age and condition.

It is unnecessary to dwell further on the defects of this series of works. That Browning's power is often manifest in them, need not be said, but we shall not delay to note these cases; better examples are afforded elsewhere. One remark, however, is to be added. These works fall into two classes, — those which were written to be acted, and are in form regular dramas; and those which only partially follow this form, and were evidently not intended for the stage. In the latter, Browning has freer play for his own special aptitudes, and is, consequently, more successful. *Pippa Passes*, in parts, and *A Soul's Tragedy* afford fine examples of his power. To the latter, the characterization of Chiappino and Ogniben, as well as the humor and irony, gives a high rank among Browning's works.

Meanwhile, side by side with these works, there had been coming from the press a series of short poems in which Browning was working out the vein in which he has gained his greatest results. These poems were subsequently gathered together under the title of *Dramatic*

*Romances and Lyrics*. *My Last Duchess* is an example of the former; the *Cavalier Song* quoted in Chapter I., of the latter. Among the happiest in conception and execution may be mentioned *Saul* (*Part I.*), *The Lost Leader*, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, *The Boy and the Angel*, and *The Bishop orders his Tomb in St. Praxed's Church*. The latter may take its place beside *Andrea del Sarto* as one of the most perfect of Browning's productions, and it is accordingly quoted here.

The Bishop is dying, and has summoned his sons (for his life has been an immoral one) to his bedside, to give orders for the construction of his tomb. He typifies the merely sensuous love of the beautiful, — a sort of animal delight in it, — which, unlike the true love of beauty, described in Chapter IV., does not develop the spirit, nor raise it towards the infinite. The Bishop is of the earth, earthy. He embodies, too, certain tendencies of the Renaissance. No one who studied that marvellous period, whether in its history, its literature, or its plastic art, can fail to be profoundly struck by the way in which Paganism and Christianity, philosophic scepticism and gross superstition, the antique and the modern, enthusiastic love of the beautiful and vile immorality, were all mingled together without much, if any, consciousness of incompatibility or inconsistency. All this is made vivid in the poem before us. "I know no other piece of modern English prose or poetry," says Ruskin, speaking of this poem, "in which there is so much told as in these lines, of the *Renaissance* spirit, — its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all I have said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the 'Stones of Venice' put into as many lines, Browning's also being the antecedent work."

## THE BISHOP ORDERS HIS TOMB AT SAINT PRAXED'S CHURCH.

ROME, 15—.

VANITY, saith the preacher, vanity!
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews — sons mine . . . ah God, I know not! Well —
She, men would have to be your mother once,
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
And as she died so must we die ourselves,
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
"Do I live, am I dead!" Peace, peace seems all.
Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
— Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the aëry dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,

21. "Epistle-side": the right-hand side as one faces the altar (Rolfe's Selections from Browning).

The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.
— Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!
Draw close: that conflagration of my church
— What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!
My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,
Drop water gently till the surface sink,
And if ye find . . . ah God, I know not, I! . . .
Bedded in store of rotten figleaves soft,
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
Some lump, ah God, of *lapis lazuli*,
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast . . .
Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,
That brave Frascati villa with its bath,
So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
Like God the Father's globe on both his hands
Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,
For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst!
Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years;
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black —
'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,

31. "Onion-stone": Browning's translation of Italian *cipollino,* name of a kind of marble which splits into layers like an onion (Rolfe's Selections).

42. "*Lapis lazuli*": a beautiful blue stone.

46. "Frascati": a resort in the neighborhood of Rome.

48–49. Still to be seen in the "Jesu Church" (*Il Gesu*) at Rome.

54. "Antique-black": translation of Italian *Nero-antico* (Rolfe's Selections).

Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
And Moses with the tables . . . but I know
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope
To revel down my villas while I gasp
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!
Nay, boys, ye love me — all of jasper, then!
'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve
My bath must needs be left behind, alas!
One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,
There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world —
And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,
And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?
— That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line —
Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!
And then how I shall lie through centuries,
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
And see God made and eaten all day long,

57–58. Such ornaments are common on ancient sarcophagi.

60–62. Note the significant mingling of incongruous subjects.

66. "Travertine": a species of limestone, much used for common purposes in Rome.

74. The collection of Greek Mss. was a favorite pursuit of the virtuosi of those days.

79. "Ulpian": a later writer on law, died 228 A.D., whose Latin was therefore not the choicest.

82–84. Note the gross, sensuous materialism condensed into these powerful lines.

And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!
For as I lie here, hours of the dead night,
Dying in state and by such slow degrees,
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,
And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,
And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop
Into great laps and folds of sculptor's work:
And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,
About the life before I lived this life,
And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,
Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount,
Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,
And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
—Aha, ELUCESCEBAT, quoth our friend?
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!
Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.
All *lapis*, all, sons! Else I give the Pope
My villas! Will ye ever eat my heart?
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
They glitter like your mother's for my soul,
Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase
With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term,

95. Cf. ll. 59, 60. Browning himself explains: "In *St. Praxed*, the blunder as to 'the sermon' is the result of the dying man's haziness; he would not reveal himself as he does but for that" (*vide* Rolfe's Selections, p. 195). St. Praxed was a woman.

98. "Marble's language": the language best suited for inscriptions—as Latin certainly is.

99. "Elucescebat": a form not found in Latin of the best age.

108. "Vizor": a masque such as was worn by ancient actors. "Term": a bust springing from a square pillar. Both these objects are commonly found represented on ancient sarcophagi.

And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,
To comfort me on my entablature
Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
To death — ye wish it — God, ye wish it! Stone —
Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
As if the corpse they keep were oozing through —
And no more *lapis* to delight the world!
Well go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs
— Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
That I may watch at leisure if he leers —
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

To work of this form, Browning seems wholly to have devoted himself after the publication of the last of his dramas in 1846. The result was given to the world in two volumes, — *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personæ* (1864). The other poems published during this period, viz. *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*, are longer, duller, more argumentative, less picturesque, than most of those included in the two collections mentioned, but do not essentially differ from them. *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* are the two volumes which contain the happiest and most varied exhibition of Browning's power, and are the culmination of his genius. It is to be noted that they cover almost two decades of the poet's life, — from his thirty-fourth to his fifty-second year, a period during which man's powers generally unite the maximum of vigor and maturity. In them Browning was working on the

material, and in the ways which suit him best and are most characteristic of him. The form of these pieces varies somewhat; but, as the names given to these two volumes (as well as to the previous collection of the same character) indicate, there is a dramatic element present in nearly all; while at the same time they are not dramas. M. Milsand describes the type when he says, "to unfold a thought, and by this very thought to reveal a character who colors the thought, is a favorite method with Browning." The description will be more complete if we add the converse,—that to reveal a character or situation, and thereby unfold a thought, is a frequent and favorite method with him. In some cases, as in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, the thought is the prime matter, and the character is no more than hinted at. In others, as in *The Bishop Orders his Tomb*, the character predominates, and the thought is in the background. In still others, as *Andrea del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, there is a balance between the two sides.

In 1868 Browning published his longest and, in some respects, his greatest work, *The Ring and the Book*. It marks a turning-point in the poet's career. Tendencies which had hitherto been subordinate, become after this date dominant; and *The Ring and the Book*, while in some respects the culmination of his earlier work, contains the indications of the change. It is in every way a most remarkable and characteristic production. The first point that strikes one is the length of the poem. It contains almost 22,000 lines. *Paradise Lost* has not half that number (10,565); the *Iliad* has less than 16,000. Yet, instead of containing an account of the whole universe, like the first-mentioned, or involving a large number of persons and incidents like the second, it relates only an incident of

private life, — a murder which took place in Rome towards the close of the seventeenth century. The poem is divided into twelve books. In the first and last the poet speaks in person. The intervening ten are dramatic, each containing, in an unbroken monologue, an account of the case by some person interested.

In the introductory book the poet gives the genesis of the poem, — tells how he found in a Florence bookstall an old volume giving an account of the trial in a case of murder; he closes with an outline of the facts of the story, showing thus early that the interest of the poem is not to be a plot interest. The story is briefly this. Guido Franceschini, a nobleman of Arezzo, poor but of ancient family, has spent the best years of his life in vainly seeking advancement and wealth at the Papal Court. Embittered by long years of hope deferred, already on the verge of old age, he resolves to establish himself in another way, — by marriage with an heiress, — and to retire to the ancestral home at Arezzo. Under the guidance of a younger and more politic brother, who is a priest, he proposes to marry Pompilia, a young and innocent girl of sixteen, beneath him in rank, but the only child of parents reputed wealthy. The father, Pietro, refuses the offer; the mother, however, comes to a secret understanding with Guido; and, the girl being an ignorant and submissive tool in her hands, the marriage takes place. The father, after some resistance, accepts the irretrievable; the old couple foolishly put all their property in the hands of their new son-in-law, and accompany him to Arezzo, to form henceforth a part of his household. The marriage proves to be an altogether unsuitable and unhappy one. Guido, wishing to be rid of the old couple, makes life unendurable to them by his brutalities, and they return to Rome, leaving

is seized, however, on Roman territory; Pompilia, too, almost miraculously, had escaped instant death, and survived several days to give evidence against her husband. Guido and his companions are condemned to death; appeal is made to the Pope, who affirms the sentence, and they suffer accordingly. Such is the story outlined in Book I. It also furnishes a sort of prologue to each of the ten following books, explaining the circumstances in which the several monologues are spoken.

Books II.–IV. present the judgment of the world of onlookers upon the case. In Book II., a gossiping Roman narrates the story to a friend. He gives a version which represents the point of view of those who incline to take part with the husband, and the book is entitled *Half-Rome*. In Book III., another nameless speaker gives an account which is favorable to the wife, and represents *The Other Half-Rome*. Both these speakers are average men of the middle class. But in Book IV., entitled *Tertium Quid*, we have the story as told in a corner of a drawing-room, where is gathered the highest and most cultivated society of Rome. The narrator is a gentleman who plumes himself on his critical acumen and superior penetration, and, accordingly, he takes a more subtle, balanced, not to say cynical, view of the case, than the two former. Each of these narrators has an individuality of his own, clearly conceived by the poet, and exhibited in the indirect way characteristic of him. And though the narrators have no immediate interest in the case, and each believes himself impartial,—though each narrative is, taken by itself, a satisfactory and plausible version,—yet, when acquainted with all, we see that in each the truth is colored and warped by the speaker's character and circumstances.

In the following three books, additional light is thrown

on the case by the statements of the three persons most immediately concerned. First, in Book V., Guido makes his defence before the judges, wherein he does not deny the act, but manages to put facts in such a light as to afford a plausible excuse for it. Opposed to this, we have, in Book IV., the passionate speech of Caponsacchi, the priest by whose assistance Pompilia had escaped from Arezzo,—an eloquent vindication of the lofty motives which actuated Pompilia and himself. Then, in Book VII., with great pathos and power, Pompilia on her death-bed tells the story of her life.

Books VIII. and IX. contain the pleadings of the lawyers who uphold the causes of Guido and Pompilia respectively. They are less interesting than the preceding, because, among other reasons, neither speaker even professes to throw any light on the real facts of the case. Lawyer-like, they have no concern whatever with truth, but are merely desirous of gaining their point and showing their subtlety. In Book X. the good old Pope Innocent reviews the case, and gives judgment. In doing so, he finds occasion to consider the existing condition of society, and the grounds of the principles on which he himself acts; so that Browning has here an opportunity for treating those fundamental questions of which he is so enamoured. In Book XI. Guido, now desperate and on the eve of execution, again speaks, no longer artfully presenting himself and his facts in the guise which may best excuse his crime, but revealing his inmost nature with powerful and terrible frankness. Finally, in the concluding book, the poet again comes forward, gives some additional details, and the moral of the whole.

We have thus (for the Pope but briefly refers to the facts of the case) the story retold ten times from as many dif-

ferent points of view. At first sight, at least, no plan could seem more awkward and inartistic; probably in the whole range of literature no poem with any claims to greatness could be found written on so astounding a plan. And yet, inartistic as it is, the plan is remarkably suited to Browning's special aims and aptitudes. It has already been noted that it is Browning's favorite method to reveal character by exhibiting the mental attitude of an individual to some one fact or thought. In *The Ring and the Book*, he has enlarged the scope of his method. He unfolds, through a series of typical characters, a picture of the community at large, exhibited in its attitude towards a single event — this crime of Guido. His plan affords him abundant opportunity for revealing character in monologues which arise naturally from the circumstances; the long and unbroken analysis of motive is in keeping with the situation. The resulting portraits are equal to anything that Browning has ever produced. Caponsacchi, the Pope, Pompilia, Guido, are each a masterpiece of conception and execution. The portraits of the three representatives of public opinion are not less true and detailed, but neither in themselves nor in the situation in which they are placed, can they have the power of interesting the feelings which Pompilia and Caponsacchi possess. The least interesting portions of the poem are the two books devoted to the lawyers; not that these characters are less lifelike, but these are tedious and uninteresting persons, whose lucubrations in real life we would fain be spared, and are scarcely desirous of voluntarily inflicting them upon ourselves in fiction. This is a defect in Browning's method. Tedious or disagreeable characters may, when intermingled with those of a different kind, be a source of pleasure in works of the imagination. Thersites, Polonius, Dogberry, are all sources of

pleasure. But Browning's method compels him to administer these disagreeable personages in large and undiluted doses; so that we become disgusted with Mr. Sludge, and yawn over Hyacinthus de Archangelis, as we would in the case of their prototypes in real life.

Besides what it owes to these characters in the foreground, *The Ring and the Book* is impressive in virtue of the power and verisimilitude with which the background to the central events and persons is indicated. A succession of minute and, as it were, cursory touches, reveals the condition of society and of the Church at the time. The vividness, also, of the glimpses which the poem gives into the more trivial manners and customs of everyday life, impresses the reader with the thoroughness of the poet's acquaintance with the period, and his complete command of his materials.

So far in this work we have noted manifestations of those qualities which had already been so successfully exhibited in *Dramatic Romances*, *Men and Women*, and *Dramatis Personæ.* It was premised, however, that *The Ring and the Book* is a transition work, and we now proceed to this second side, — to the tendencies which are to become predominant in works written subsequently to 1868. Already in Chapter I. attention was drawn to the keenness and subtlety of Browning's intellect. He has, in an extraordinary degree among the men of this generation, a power in which this generation probably surpasses all its predecessors, — that of seeing the various sides of a question, of understanding views and positions wholly different from one's own. His dramatic power is, in no small degree, dependent on this quality. It is through intellectual insight, rather than through emotional sympathy, that he is able to enter into various characters. It has been said

that had Browning chosen the law as his profession, he would have been the greatest special pleader the English Bar has ever seen. For the exercise of this power, the plan of *The Ring and the Book* gives the amplest scope. Of his power of plausibly presenting a case at variance with his own way of thinking, he had previously given proof especially in *Mr. Sludge, the Medium*, and *Bishop Blougram's Apology*. But henceforward his works, to a much greater degree, exhibit this predilection for presenting characters and pleas which are furthest removed from his own sympathies.

Closely connected with this mental trait is his view of truth already explained. Truth in this world is relative. Only by struggling with the various forms of the false and erroneous does the great poet gain some faint glimpse of heavenly and absolute truth. This deep sense of the relativity and many-sidedness of truth, of the multitudinous modifications and links through which each truth is dependent on all others, and of the inadequacy of language to express it, is continually reappearing in Browning's works. One recalls the figure under which is imaged in *Sordello* the difficulty of stating any idea in its truth and entirety.

> Observe a pompion twine afloat;
> Pluck me one cup from off the castle moat!
> Along with cup you raise leaf, stalk, and root,
> The entire surface of the pool to boot.
> So could I pluck a cup, put in one song
> A single sight, did not my hand, too strong,
> Twitch in the least the root-strings of the whole.
> How should externals satisfy my soul? (p. 121.)

With these peculiarities of Browning's genius and philosophy is connected a peculiarity in his method. We have

seen that he has certain truths to utter, and that he utters them dramatically, modifying them to suit the character to whom they are ascribed. For this he has an excellent artistic reason, — he thus gives body and color to the abstract, makes the intangible picturesque. But he has another reason which he reveals at the close of the poem which we are considering: —

It is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least.
How look a brother in the face and say
"Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou yet are blind,
Thine ears are stuffed and stopped, despite their length,
And, oh, the foolishness thou countest faith!"
Say this as silverly as tongue can troll —
The anger of the man may be endured,
The shrug, the disappointed eyes of him
Are not so bad to bear — but here's the plague,
That all this trouble comes of telling truth,
Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false,
Seems to be just the thing it would supplant,
Nor recognizable by whom it left —
While falsehood would have done the work of truth
But Art, — wherein man nowise speaks to men,
Only to mankind, — Art may tell a truth
Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
Nor wrong the thought missing the mediate word.
So may you paint your picture, twice show truth
Beyond mere imagery on the wall, —
So note by note bring music from your mind
Deeper than ever the Andante dived, —
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.

— (Bk. XII., ll. 838–63.)

Browning further believes that truths rendered from different points of view will be more adequately grasped than they would be from any attempt (to Browning both painful and unsatisfactory) to reproduce them exactly as they are in his own mind. This sense of the complexity and many-sidedness of truth seems, with increased experience, to have forced itself more and more on the Poet, and has had a marked influence on his later works. In this respect, again, the plan of *The Ring and the Book* meets his need, and is an exemplification of the truth on which the need is founded. In Book I. he defends the many-sidedness of his presentation of this story, comparing his poem to a landscape painted not as it appears merely at some particular season, but in all the phases which it assumes through the changeful year.

A novel country: I might make it mine
By choosing which one aspect of the year
Suited mood best, and putting solely that
On panel somewhere in the House of Fame,
Landscaping what I saved, not what I saw:
— Might fix you, whether frost in goblin-time
Startled the moon with his abrupt bright laugh,
Or, August's air afloat in filmy fire,
She fell, arms wide, face foremost on the world,
Swooned there and so singed out the strength of things.
Thus were abolished Spring and Autumn both,
The land dwarfed to one likeness of the land,
Life cramped corpse-fashion. Rather learn and love
Each facet-flash of the revolving year! —
Red, green, and blue that whirl into a white,
The variance now, the eventual unity,
Which make the miracle. See it for yourselves,

This man's act,[1] changeable because alive!
Action now shrouds, now shows the informing thought;
Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:
Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,
Shifted a hair's breadth shoots yon dark for bright,
Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so
Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.
Once set such orbs, — white styled, black stigmatized, —
A rolling, see them once on the other side
Your good men, and your bad men every one,
From Guido Franceschini to Guy Faux,
Oft would you rub your eyes and change your names.

— (Bk. I., ll. 1348–78.)

1 Viz. Guido's crime.

# CHAPTER VIII.

## DEVELOPMENT: THIRD PERIOD.

THE year 1868, in which *The Ring and the Book* was published, is a dividing line in Browning's poetic career. During the next two years no work by him appeared; but in the decade beginning with 1871, nearly every year produced one book, and some years more than one. The volume of his work since 1870 is greater than that of the thirty-five years of literary activity which preceded the publication of *The Ring and the Book;* yet in 1870 Browning was nearly sixty years of age. Now, it has often been observed that age, no matter how vigorous, is unfavorable to the production of imaginative work. Judgment may be surer, intellectual keenness undiminished, knowledge and experience increased; but the power of creative imagination, the power of imparting life and beauty, of touching the emotions through works of art, is decadent. This is illustrated in the works of nearly all our great novel-writers; it is manifest in Milton and in Wordsworth; it is most strikingly apparent in Goethe; it is perhaps visible even in Shakespeare, though he died when little more than fifty.

Browning is a man in whom the purely poetic endowment has always been proportionately weak. In other words, a great part of the worth of his work has always been due to qualities not necessarily or purely poetic,— to intellectual force and acuteness, to scientific insight and power of analysis. It appeals to intellect rather than to feeling. When even the works of his prime are apt to fail

somewhat on the purely poetic side, it is not astonishing that the productions of his old age are in this respect seriously defective. Every one of the numerous works published since 1868, seems to lack that essential something which constitutes a great poem. He has written nothing to equal the best of his earlier works, — nothing to raise him in our estimation as a poet. There is, on the other hand, no indication of decay in the man: our impression of his intellectual power, of his exhaustless energy, of his many-sided interests, of his learning, is deepened; but not our impression of his artistic power, of his sense of beauty and form. These volumes are marked by diffuseness, — by a tendency to express his thoughts fully, whether or not they have any close bearing on the theme in hand. To the story which forms the subject of *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, he prefixes a rambling talk of twenty-five pages, which has little connection with the theme, and little value in itself. He manifests petulance, and a contempt of criticism, excusable perhaps, and common enough among great men whose work has been ill-appreciated. He finds pleasure in giving the reins to caprice in subject, manner, and metre, — witness *Pacchiarotto.* Like Wordsworth in his old age, he seems to hold that whatever interests him, and he chooses to give to the public, is of value, and will repay the struggle through any obstacles which his manner may impose upon the reader. A sensational story meets his eye. It interests him; his imagination evolves the characters and motives, and he embodies the repulsive tale in a poem, *The Inn Album.* Another pathological study attracts his scientific instinct, — a man half-crazed between religion and passion. He analyzes the mental condition of this character, and the *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, a volume of 220 pages, — is

the result. These are powerful works,—great in their way; but had Browning written nothing better, it seems doubtful whether in fifty years his poems would be regarded otherwise than as literary curiosities. The same tendency to sensational themes and treatment is apparent, also, in his shorter poems, of which he has published many in recent years,—in *Halbert and Hob*, *Ned Bratts*, *Ivan Ivanovitch*, and *Donald*. These short pieces resemble in general form and subject *Men and Women*, and *Dramatis Personæ;* but there is between the productions of the two periods a contrast not less marked than that between Wordsworth's early and late work.

Three of the longer poems of these later years, viz. *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* (1871), *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), and *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), are examples of those ingenious special pleadings which Browning is fond of putting into the mouths of his personages. In each of these poems we have a speaker maintaining a thesis which Browning certainly holds to be erroneous, and yet maintaining it by arguments which contain what he holds to be the deepest truths. In this curious way he manages to instil that truth which it is his function as a subjective poet to reveal. Prince Hohenstiel, who is clearly intended for the last emperor of the French, defends, in the poem named after him, his own life and principles; in other words, the policy of expediency. Than this policy nothing could be less in sympathy with the Poet's temperament and principles; yet, not only is the apology a most plausible one, but also the Poet manages to flash upon his reader through this distorting medium the light of his own abstract truth. In *Fifine*, we have a Don Juan, who sets out with a sophistic defence of his amours and infidelities, but manages to give, before he closes, the fullest exposition we

have of Browning's philosophy in regard to the relation of finite to absolute, — of the passing shows of this world to the everlasting verities of the divine idea, — of error and falsehood to right and truth. The gist of the poem is expressed in the familiar lines of Shelley: —

> The One remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
> Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
> Stains the white radiance of eternity —

*Fifine* is deserving of close study by any one who desires a clear view of Browning's philosophy. Towards the close of it, the world is presented under the figure of a city, whose buildings, apparently solid, are actually in a continual state of flux. There stands a temple, Religion, namely, massive and firm to the eye of the ordinary spectator. More penetrating vision, however, observes that it is suffering continual change, like the towers and battlements which the fanciful eye sees in the clouds that surround the setting sun. Gradually the old edifice vanishes, and a new takes its place. But the temple is ever there. That is to say, the forms of religion are not absolute verities, but must change to suit changing and progressive man. Yet religion is not on that account the less permanent and real. As another poet says: —

> Our little systems have their day;
> They have their day and cease to be:
> They are but broken lights of thee,
> And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

And if even in the temple there is change, how much more in the neighboring Academy, which prefigures philosophy! In threescore years, what seemed the solidest of

structures has entirely vanished. So with the buildings which represent Learning, Art, and the rest. Yet in each case, though the form changes, Philosophy and Art are real. Again, if the clear-sighted observer turns his attention to the inhabitants of this city, he finds in their infinite variety representatives of an infinite variety of perfect types, to which, though for the present distorted by passing conditions, they more and more approximate. The moral of the vision is, "All is change, and yet all is permanence." The soul is true and permanent; God is true and permanent; but the former in working up towards the latter passes through a changing series of shadows,— unreal yet needful phases in progress towards absolute truth.

—For as some imperial chord subsists,
Steadily underlies the accidental mists
Of music springing thence, that run their mazy race
Around, and sink, absorbed, back to the triad base;
So, out of that one word, each variant rose and fell,
And left the same "All's change, but permanence as well."
Grave note, whence—list aloft!—harmonics sound, that mean,—
"Truth inside; and, outside, truth also; and, between
Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence.
The individual soul works through the shows of sense
(Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true)
Up to an outer soul as individual too;
And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed,
And reach at length, 'God, man, or both together mixed,'[1]
Transparent through the flesh, by parts which prove a whole,
By hints which make the soul discernible by soul,—
Yet only soul look up, not down, not hate, but love,
As truth successively takes shape, one grade above
Its last presentment, tempts as it were truth indeed

[1] From Æschylus, Prometheus, l. 116.

Revealed this time; so tempts, till we attain to read
The signs aright, and learn, by failure, truth is forced
To manifest itself through falsehood; whence divorced
By the excepted eye, at the rare season, for
The happy moment, truth instructs us to abhor
The false, and prize the true, obtainable thereby.
Then do we understand the value of a lie:
Its purpose served, its truth once safe deposited,
Each lie, superfluous now, leaves, in the singer's stead,
The indubitable song; the historic personage
Put by, leaves prominent the impulse of his age;
Truth sets aside speech, act, time, place, indeed, but brings
Nakedly forward now the principle of things
Highest and least."
Wherewith change ends. What other change to dread,
When, disengaged at last from every veil, instead
Of type remains the truth? Once falsehood; but anon
*Theosuton e broteion eper kekeramenon,*[1] —
Something as true as soul is true, though veils between
Are false and fleet away. — (*Fifine*, §§ cxxiv.–v.)

Both of these poems — *Prince Hohenstiel* and *Fifine* — are worthy of study for their substance; but in both the artistic element is defective. The picturesque side, the character painting, is but lightly touched. The dramatic circumstances of the defence of the Prince are inadequate and unnatural, — and this accounts, perhaps, for the Poet's representing, at the close, the defence as a mere dream or reverie. So, at the close of *Fifine*, he half indicates that Don Juan's auditor was a ghostly one, conjured up by the fancy.

The third poem mentioned above — *Aristophanes' Apology* — is the most noteworthy of the works which have followed *The Ring and the Book*, and is, indeed, a striking

[1] The Greek line quoted above in English form.

exhibition of Browning's power. Browning had, in his earlier works, more than once given indications of a special interest in Euripides. The Pope in *The Ring and the Book* refers to him in a lengthy passage; and in 1871, *Balaustion's Adventure, including a Transcript from Euripides*, had given a version of the *Alcestis*. There is, in fact, more than one bond of sympathy between the two poets. Euripides, too, is a philosopher, as well as a poet, and Browning finds in him that thirst for absolute truth, and that contempt for authority in pursuit of it, which he himself exemplifies and admires. They possess in common a certain subtlety of intellect, and a fondness for special pleading. They hold, moreover, analogous positions in the development of poetry. Both are innovators; both consider all that is human, fit subject for art, and, in accordance with this theory, both have attempted to widen the sphere of poetry, and have thus been brought into a similar conflict with convention. It was, doubtless, this similarity in position that set Browning writing *Aristophanes' Apology*, which is simply a version of the well-known contention between Euripides and Aristophanes. It affords another example of Browning's special pleading. Aristophanes in person defends his art, and his method of attacking Euripides; while he, at the same time, criticises both the poetry and philosophy of his adversary. Euripides' case is presented by Balaustion, the beautiful young Rhodian woman, in whose mouth Browning had already put his version of the *Alcestis*. Feeling her inequality with so stout a champion as Aristophanes, she reads, as Euripides' best defence, a sample of his work, the play named Herakles,—or rather, of course, Browning's translation of it. The author's sympathy is evidently with Euripides; yet in Aristophanes' presentation of the ques-

tion, Browning embodies much of his own subjective truth. Again, this poem is an example of his favorite method of presenting truth indirectly and dramatically. It is a work, as was said, of great power; the portrait of Aristophanes is a striking one; the poct shows his mastery over a great store of knowledge. But it is not a poem that can ever be popular; the theme is too narrow in its interest, and is treated with too much historic and technical detail.

The volume published in 1876, *Pacchiarotto, and Other Poems* is marked by two peculiarities, — by the number of pieces in which the Poet directly or covertly defends and explains his work, and by his increased tendency to present opposing aspects of truth without, as it were, committing himself. *Pacchiarotto* presents two opposite views of the proper employment of life,— whether man ought to struggle against surrounding conditions, or submit to them. Into each side of the argument enters a certain amount of truth. *Pisgah Sights* give two opposing aspects of the same problem; while *Bifurcation* argues on one hand for the sacrifice of love to duty, on the other in behalf of the sacrifice of duty to love. Another odd non-committal poem is *Tears and Scruples*, which has for its subject the difficulties of religious belief.

In 1877 appeared a translation of the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus; in 1878 *The Two Poets of Croisic*, and *La Saisiaz.* The latter, occasioned by the death of a friend, discusses the question of immortality. The Poet finds the ordinary arguments in its favor all faulty, and finally rests his belief in it on his individual conviction, — a result quite in harmony with the transcendental character of his philosophy. In 1879–80 were published two collections of short pieces entitled *Dramatic Idyls;* in 1883, another small collection of short Poems, *Jocoseria;* in 1885, appeared *Ferish-*

*tah's Fancies;* in 1887, *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance.* These short poems have been briefly characterized already, and need not further detain us. It remains to say something of the *man* Browning, before we close.

The careful study of his works confirms the claim Browning puts forth in *Sordello;* in his case the man is greater than the poet. English literature, in the nineteenth century, presents an unusual array of great poets, — Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning. The rank which Browning will ultimately hold among these as a poet, it would be premature to attempt to fix; but one might, perhaps, venture to assert that of the seven named, Browning is the greatest man. In many-sidedness of intellectual interests and powers, Coleridge alone resembles him. But Coleridge lacked energy of will to guide and concentrate his intellectual efforts. There is a dreamy, unfinished, slovenly element in Coleridge's character, life, and work. Therein Browning is his direct antithesis. Nothing in him is more impressive than a certain force and energy of character. He has that wholesome activity that belongs to a healthy and strong nature. "He rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race." He thirsts to enjoy life to the full, to tax every energy, to submit to every experience. In *Saul* he reflects his own sense of the beauty, bliss, and worth of life. Listen to the fulness of vigor palpitating in the lines, which he sympathetically puts into the mouth of the young shepherd David, fresh and unworn from the air of the open hills: —

"Oh, our manhood's prime vigour! No spirit feels waste,
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing nor sinew unbraced.
Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the cool silver shock
Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the hunt of the bear,

And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair.
And the meal, the rich dates yellowed over with gold dust divine,
And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher, the full draught of wine,
And the sleep in the dried river-channel where bulrushes tell
That the water was wont to go warbling so softly and well.
How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses for ever in joy!"
— (*Saul*, § ix.)

The unquenchable desire, depicted in Sordello, to exhaust all that life has to offer, Browning himself also shares. He combines Paracelsus' infinite thirst for knowledge with Aprile's infinite thirst for joy. He feels the yearning that Goethe felt and embodied in Faust. Combined with this energy and fulness of desire is a strong and active imagination which endows the creations of the mind with the reality of material things. This peculiarity Browning depicts in the character of Sordello, who has what would seem to ordinary men the strange notion of finding compensation for the narrowness of his real, in the completeness of his imaginative experience. To quote the admirable characterization of M. Milsand: "Throughout the works of our author we are brought into contact with natures for whom the conceptions of the mind have, as it were, the solidity of material objects, — with whom sentiments and aspirations, such as are scarce audible in ordinary natures, speak almost with the clearness of physical needs, — with whom ideas and wishes are so perfect and rounded, that for them to wish is to be able, to imagine is to see, to desire is to possess." One may draw attention then to the many points in which Browning's philosophy harmonizes with such a nature, — the reality and importance of the inner as compared with the outer life, the higher significance of what we *will*, as compared with what we *do*, of effort as compared with attainment.

From the energy and many-sidedness of Browning's characters arises, as M. Milsand notices, "a necessity of widening his horizon, of quitting his own person, in order to interest himself in all that exists." And from the strength of his imaginative power arises the means to which he has resort in order to realize this necessity. He realizes it in imaginative experience, — in poetry. To quote M. Milsand once more: "The painter and the poet seem to Browning spirits too limited and confined, who, to escape this sense of impotence, have recourse to the imagination. They create scenes, epical adventures, chimerical splendor, in order that they may in fancy reign over the infinite, — that they may possess and accomplish in idea that which human conditions do not permit them to accomplish and possess in reality. Yet in spite of himself, this royalty of imagination begets a species of chagrin; it is but an incomplete possession, and an existence imperfectly realized."

His poetry, then, is for Browning, but a form of activity, a means of realizing his own individuality. He is not an Eglamour; his poetry is not the end of his existence; he does not submit to his art, nor sacrifice his perfection as a man to the perfection of his work. Like Goethe, he writes not so much to produce a great work,— to please others, as to afford play to his own individuality. Necessarily, then, as he points out in *Sordello*, his work is imperfect. He has himself rather than his reader in view. He is seeking to give complete and accurate expression to what is within him, rather than to give beauty and artistic completeness to his work. Accordingly, the incongruous and non-essential from the artistic point of view, he does not prune away; these are needful for the true and complete expression of his own mind.

# INDEX OF POEMS.[1]



[1] The original date of publication is appended, and, in the case of shorter poems, also the general title under which they appeared. When a poem appears under a different general title in the final edition now being published, this is also cited. Numbers in italics indicate that the poem is quoted in full, or analyzed on the corresponding pages.